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**Migration in the Margins:
A Feminist Geopolitical Study of Mexico's Southern Border**

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**Migration in the Margins:
A Feminist Geopolitical Study of Mexico's Southern Border**

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the many people making difficult journeys around the world.

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Abstract

Migration in the Margins: A Feminist Geopolitical Study of Mexico's Southern Border

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U.S. support for border enforcement in Mexico has been ongoing for decades, but after the arrival of unprecedented numbers of Central American minors and families in the U.S. Southwest in 2014, greater pressure was placed on Mexico to seal its border with Guatemala. This thesis explores the resulting tensions between the latest Mexican border enforcement policies, intended to tighten security and surveillance especially in the south of the country, and the relatively new (2011) Migration Law, intended to facilitate the protection of migrants' rights. Drawing on critical discourse analysis as well as a feminist geopolitical approach to ethnography, this thesis looks at the ways that the boundaries of the Mexican state are maintained through both infrastructural and administrative barriers, resulting in the creation of marginal spaces where migrants are simultaneously included and excluded from state protection. Importantly, this thesis finds that the state margins, while often the sites of neglect, exploitation, and exception, also serve as sites of creative resistance, where alternative geographies are developed. In some instances, as during the summer of 2016 in Oaxaca, Mexico, resistance in separate marginal spaces overlaps,

generating opportunities for migrants' increased mobility in the southern border region. In conclusion, this thesis calls for a reexamination of the ways that migrants' rights are upheld, and maintains that threads of accountability must be traced between local, national and international actors.

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Chapter I: Introduction

U.S. support for border enforcement in Mexico has been ongoing for decades, but after the arrival of unprecedented numbers of Central American minors and families in the U.S. Southwest in 2014, greater pressure was placed on Mexico to seal its border with Guatemala. While overall migration to the United States has decreased to early 1970s levels and migration from Mexico specifically has dropped considerably,¹ migration from the Northern Triangle countries – Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador – has steadily risen (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). From 2011 to 2014, the number of apprehensions of unaccompanied minors from these countries multiplied more than tenfold, peaking in 2014 at over 51,705, a 248% increase from the previous year (US. CBP 2017; WOLA 2016). The number of families from the Northern Triangle crossing the U.S. border has also increased in recent years, a trend that migration experts expect to remain constant so long as high rates of violence and unemployment persist in their home countries (Beltrán 2016).

As media coverage of this phenomenon has increased, the U.S. has placed greater pressure on Mexico to seal its southern border, the entry point into the final and most arduous leg of migrants' path north. At the same time, international and local human rights organizations have pressured the Mexican government to pursue border enforcement strategies that ensure migrants' rights, thus opening potential avenues for safe passage through the country. Both projects have fallen under the umbrella of

¹ From 2009 to 2014, there has been a net loss of 140,000 people migrating to the US from Mexico. For more, see U.S. CBP 2016 and Gonzalez-Barrera 2015.

Programa Frontera Sur, announced on July 7, 2014 by President Peña Nieto, drawing on U.S. funding through the *Mérida Initiative* to “order” Mexico’s southern border (Wilson & Valenzuela 2014). The contradiction apparent in these conflicting agendas – the securitization of the border through increased policing and surveillance on the one hand, and the protection of migrants’ rights through state institutions on the other – results in the production of a landscape of uncertainty for those attempting to safely cross nation-state lines.²

As many scholars and journalists have already shown, the undocumented journey through Mexico is more dangerous and lengthy than ever before (de Leon 2015; Martínez 2014; Vogt 2013). What has been less documented is how migrants, in pursuit of protected legal status and access to justice within the country, remain in the margins of the nation-state, never fully incorporated nor absolutely excluded from its boundaries. By investigating how migrants navigate the infrastructure and administration of border enforcement in southern Mexico, this thesis attempts to expose how nation-state policies and international security agreements are experienced in the everyday. In studying the state from the perspective of the margins -- from places of exclusion, expulsion, exploitation and neglect -- I endeavor to bring attention to the ways that the strict lines of official policy become blurred, producing spaces of precarity and exception in the extended border zone.

² For more on the contradictions apparent in the implementation of Mexico’s progressive migration policies among Central American residents in southern Mexico, see Carte 2014.

To pursue this route of inquiry, this thesis sets out to achieve the following objectives: 1) to trace the discursive and material making of the borderlands in southern Mexico; 2) to map migrants' experiences navigating border enforcement and immigration administration against the official state narratives, exposing points of intersection and contradiction across scales; 3) to observe the ways that alternative geographies are creatively produced in the margins by migrants, both in response to state border enforcement and administrative practices as well as in unintended correspondence with other marginalized populations' resistance of state intervention.

I conducted fieldwork in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico from June 2016 to August 2016, totaling eight weeks of research. Volunteering at a migrant shelter in the capital of Oaxaca state, I used participant observation and ethnographic research methods to gather stories from both migrants and migrant advocates to learn about recent shifts in the border enforcement landscape of southern Mexico. Through engagement in the everyday functioning of this transit space, I learned how migrants' mobility is constrained and negotiated through direct contact with state institutions, as well as through its evasion.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed how the history and politics of Oaxaca and the southern border region in general also impacted migrants' mobility and state border enforcement practices in unforeseen ways. Taking this into account, this thesis incorporates analysis of how local social movements inadvertently impacted migrants' journeys during the summer of 2016. While not the main focus of my research, attention to the surrounding political context helps to demonstrate how different scales and systems of marginality intersect in complex ways. In some instances, these

intersections open up more space for creativity in the margins, forging alternative geographies and connecting differently situated subjects who share disenfranchised positionings in global neoliberal processes.

This study also employs critical discourse analysis to identify and interpret official state narratives concerning recent border enforcement strategies in southern Mexico, grouped together under the *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS, the Southern Border Program). Looking both at the physical infrastructure recently updated or constructed in the southern border region as well as at the state's official statements surrounding its intended purpose, this macro-level analysis examines the state's performance of sovereignty both in relation to its control of transnational flows of goods and people, as well as its distinction from its northern neighbor. These official border narratives are later drawn upon as points of comparison with migrants' everyday experiences, connecting and contrasting geopolitics across scales.

The following sections of this chapter outline my feminist geopolitical approach, conceptualization of the state and its margins, including the theoretical themes to be later discussed. I conclude this chapter introducing my field research methods, study site and my positionality as a U.S.-based academic conducting fieldwork in Mexico.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEMINIST GEOPOLITICS

This research follows a feminist geopolitical theoretical approach, connecting state-level discourse to the practices and encounters of the everyday (Dixon & Marston 2011; Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004; Hyndman 2001). In doing so, it breaches

binary conceptual divisions between the global and the local, and inverts discursive hierarchies that privilege state-level politics as the preferred sites of analysis over the mundane experience.

A feminist geopolitical approach to studying the state calls for attention not only to government policies and institutions, but also to the finest scale of analysis, that of the body, as a means to uncover differences in perspective as well as experience. Embodied difference often determines mobility within state systems. As Hyndman and de Alwis (2005) observe in their study of mobility and displacement in Sri Lanka, bodies are read and policed according to various axes of identity. Such attention to embodiment recognizes that difference is constructed in complex ways, often at the intersection of race, class, gender, sex, nationality, ethnicity, and religion, but also in relation to place. Awareness of the spatialities of power and difference help to locate subjects within shifting landscapes of identity and meaning. For instance, as Hyndman and de Alwis write (2005, 29), “one is never just a woman, but is always a woman from somewhere...”

Attention to embodied difference can also help to situate knowledge produced by informants and researchers. It acknowledges partiality in our perspective, and thus encourages the weaving of “webs of connection” to “join with another, to see together” and to create knowledge collectively (Haraway 1991, 191, 195). Furthermore, attention to embodied experience exposes the relationship between the material and discursive aspects of geopolitics, and thus “enables feminist geopolitical analyses to be more than critical practice or armchair theorising” in its epistemological assertion that discourse impacts and is shaped by bodies on the ground (Williams & Massaro 2013, 754). It

requires an ethic of care that is sensitive to material realities and encourages collaborative practices with actors outside of academia (Dixon & Marston 2011; Ehrkamp 2011).

Looking beyond the discipline of geography, I also draw on the work of anthropologists who similarly investigate the state in its everyday practice. In their edited compilation *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, Veena Das and Deborah Poole call for ethnographers of the state to “return to the ordinary,” exploring the mundane moments that “shift our gaze from the obvious places in which power is expected to reside to the margins and recesses of everyday life” (Das & Poole 2004, 30; Das 2007, 169). Like feminist geopolitical geographers, Das, Poole, and other contributors to their compilation ground their research in the everyday, opting for methods that require anthropologists to visit the margins of the state to observe the state’s practices and direct encounters with the people who live there. The margins of the state are conceived as “peripheries seen to form natural containers for people considered insufficiently socialized into the law” (Das & Poole 2004, 9). It is in these peripheral zones, at the edges of state sovereignty, that the power of the law is continuously reestablished “through forms of violence and authority” that mark who is within and outside state protection (13). In this thesis, the state margins are spatial and temporal zones of precarity encountered along migration routes throughout southern Mexico, and include: movement through or around checkpoints, respite and orientation in migration shelters, and waiting through administrative immigration processes. While the “forms of violence and authority” carried out by the state in the margins vary, in this thesis, they tend to

center on moments of neglect, abandonment and lack of protection for migrants (Das & Poole 2004, 13).

Conceptualization of the State

In order to follow these scholars' lead in conducting an ethnography of the state from the margins, the state must be theorized. Numerous scholars have used the work of Giorgio Agamben to locate the position of undocumented migrants in relation to the state (García Aguilar 2011; Mountz 2010, 2011; Secor 2007). Central to Agamben's thesis is the figure of *homo sacer*, the person who has only bare life and "*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (Agamben 1995, 12). The *homo sacer* is both within and outside the boundaries of the state, simultaneously subjected to its laws and excluded from full protection. Das and Poole write, "homo sacer's life is 'bare' because it can be taken by anyone without any mediation from law and without incurring the guilt of homicide" (Das & Poole 2004, 11). The *homo sacer* exists in a *state of exception*, a precarious marginality that also undergirds state sovereignty:

....because the sovereign cannot by definition be bound to the law, the political community itself becomes split along the different axes of membership and inclusion that may run along given fault lines of race, gender, and ethnicity of people, included in the political community but denied membership in political terms (Das & Poole 2004, 12).

While Das and Poole agree that it is through the production of disposable, killable bodies that the state continuously establishes its power, they differ from Agamben in their assertion that these constitutions of power through violence are not "ghostly spectral presences from the past" but rather are "embedded in everyday life in the present" (Das

& Poole 2004, 13). In other words, the production of disposable bodies is not established in the law alone, but also in ordinary, embodied encounters with the state.

Alison Mountz agrees with this critique, and goes on to point out that Agamben's lack of attention to embodiment homogenizes the experience of excluded populations. She writes that Agamben's *homo sacer* is an "undifferentiated, gender-blind, unspecified body;" for Agamben, every person is potentially "always paradoxically outside the state" (Mountz 2011, abstract). Mountz argues that those who live in a state of exception must be considered as differently situated, especially in relation to the histories and identities they embody. Individuals often experience different treatment by the state depending on their age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or even place of encounter. By not describing the material particularities of different zones of exception, Agamben produces a faceless, universal figure that is dislocated and unidentifiable, the intimacies of their experience washed away. However, by locating excluded people within particular histories, identities, and geographies, Mountz, like Das and Poole, argues that we can better understand the complexities and nuances of zones of exception; by returning to the everyday and grounding research at the juncture of discursive-material processes, we might make room for concrete, political intervention.

Some scholars have used Foucault's concepts of *governmentality* and *biopolitics* to describe the technologies of power that maintain margins (Belcher et al. 2008; Das and Poole 2004; Hyndman 2012; Mountz 2010). Although I do not heavily draw upon Foucault's theory of power and the state in this thesis, I do refer to the article "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Exception and the Topological Challenge to Geography"

(Belcher et al. 2008), in which the authors “use analytics of governmentality, which itself refers to the everyday emergence of power and control, to think through how the exception works” (2008, 501). In this article, the exception is conceived as a “potential (dis) ordering principle, a potential technique of government” (2008, 501). They place emphasis on the uncertainty produced in such zones: the power of the exception exists in its perpetual transformation; it is “both capable of becoming and of *not* becoming” (2008, 502). I find this conception of exceptionality useful in thinking through migrant’s intermittent encounters with the state, which are often characterized by uncertainty and precarity as their status as shifts from place to place or moment to moment.

Mountz might argue that this approach, which suggests strategic and systematic exclusion of certain populations through networked technologies of power, risks portraying the state as a “mysterious institution so powerful as to remain abstract and wholly detached from everyday lives” (Mountz 2010, xxxii). By locating and embodying the state in its “daily interactions with citizens and others,” the state no longer appears monolithic, magical and impossible to penetrate and alter (Mountz 2010, xxxii). Mountz is right to emphasize the state’s material distortions and heterogeneity across space and scales; her research deconstructs the state as an all-powerful and coherent institution by looking at the ways individual government officials, as socialized subjects, and specific agencies, as distinct cultural communities, establish the boundaries of the state in distinct ways. When represented *only* in disembodied form, the state might be perceived as an omniscient presence, thus growing more powerful.

On the other hand, the state does not exist *exclusively* in material and embodied form. As Talal Asad contends, the concept of the state, imagined both at its center and its margins, has significant power: “the abstract structure of the state... is the essential condition for the exercise of specific kinds of legal power...Abstractions are inevitably used in everyday discourse, and they inform our daily practices” (Asad 2004, 282). Along these lines, Das theorizes the state as “neither a purely rational-bureaucratic organization nor simply a fetish [an empty, ideological construction], but as a form of regulation that oscillates between a rational mode and a magical mode of being” (Das 2004, 225). This “magical mode of being” is partially enacted through the state’s *illegibility*, its perpetuation of ambiguity and inconsistency. While Mountz might attribute this illegibility to the haphazard nature of bureaucracies -- their misunderstandings and conflicting agendas -- Das sees this oscillation and intermittent contact as part of the state’s logic. Her analysis fits with the topologies discussed in Belcher, et al.’s article: the constant shifting, re-articulating, appearing and disappearing of the *state of exception* function as techniques of control, maintaining the margins through uncertainty. In my thesis, I argue that the reality exists between these two positions: the state is *both* a conglomerate of embodied, flawed, contradictory institutions and individuals, *and* an abstract, networked system whose inconsistencies work to marginalize certain populations.

Central to theories of the state is concept of sovereignty. Some scholars have argued that in today’s globalized, neoliberal era, nation-state sovereignty has waned (Brown 2014; Harvey 2005; Sassen 2014). The coerced enforcement of Mexico’s

southern border does raise important questions concerning the country's sovereignty on several fronts, including its asymmetrical relationship with the United States (García Aguilar 2011; Villafuerte Solís 2011), as well as its facilitation and prohibition of various types of transnational flows (Brown 2014; Paley 2014).³ While these are important questions to investigate, this thesis focuses less on the matter of state sovereignty itself, and more on its performance of sovereignty, which discursively shapes everyday interactions with its institutions on the ground. To do this, I refer to Wendy Brown's (2014) *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, analyzing the Mexican government's official narratives of border enforcement as performances of its territorial control, which serves as the basis for establishing legitimacy as a nation-state.

Conceptualization of State Margins

In the margins, the state "sees and performs itself to be seen strategically" (Mountz 2010, xxxi). Even when state practices are *visible* to those residing in margins, they are often *illegible*, opaque and inaccessible to their audiences. Talal Asad theorizes that margins might be imagined "as spaces, forms, and practices through which the state is continually both experienced and undone through the *illegibility* of its own practices, documents, and words" (Asad 2004, 279, emphasis added). Similarly, Das and Poole observe that the obscured practices of the state are techniques of governance, keeping

³ The sovereignty and recognition of the nation-state, established in the Treaty of Westphalia, hinges on authority and control over a certain territory. Without this control, the legitimacy of the ruling body claiming sovereignty over the territory would be diminished. For this reason, the "illegal" flows through the border regions—in the U.S., Mexico, and elsewhere—are perceived as the undermining of the governing body's legitimacy as a sovereign actor. For more on the legitimacy of sovereignty of the nation-state, see Brown 2014, De Genova & Peutz 2010, and Hurd 1999.

certain citizens in the margins by forcing them through lengthy or confusing legal processes, or by coopting authority of the written law to consolidate local governing power (Das 2004, 2007; Poole 2004). At times, the state and its practices are hyper visible; at other times they are hidden. Conflicting narratives are produced through such inconsistencies and intermittent contact. This thesis contends that the oscillating visibility and legibility of the state keeps migrants in zones of uncertainty, their safety and rights never fully ensured by the state.

In order to navigate these ambiguous borderlands, migrants also use visibility as a tactic to safely move through surveillanced territory, strategically making their narratives legible to the state in opportune moments and safe spaces. Their choices to follow informal or formal paths demonstrate how agency persists in landscapes of uncertainty, actively generating alternative geographies for mobility in the margins of the state.⁴ Local advocates are essential links in the chain of communication between state officials and migrants; their knowledge of the state's immigration administration and legal infrastructure, as well as their relationships with state officials facilitate and legitimate migrants' claims to state protection. These intermediary advocates are often located in migrant shelters, which serve as spaces of refuge as well as orientation for those journeying north.

In this thesis, I conceptualize margins as both *spatial* and *temporal* zones that reflect the exceptionality of the state. This is consistent with Mountz's analysis that, for those seeking protected status or access to their legal rights, "temporality is often

⁴ For more on migration mobility and agency, see Ashutosh & Mountz 2012.

conceptualized as waiting, limbo or suspension” (Mountz 2011, abstract). In reference to asylum seekers’ legal journeys, she writes that “the suspension of time maps onto corresponding spatial ambiguity theorized often as liminality, zone of exception or threshold between states” (Mountz 2011, 93-94). In their descriptions of moving through the *Regularización Humanitaria* process,⁵ many migrants with whom I spoke similarly emphasized the uncertainty produced in waiting for temporary visitor status in Mexico. This temporal liminality corresponded with a spatial marginality that migrants experienced en route or in shelters.

Albergues (migrant shelters) and migration routes have been studied by a number of anthropologist ethnographers, including Susan Coutin (2005), Wendy Vogt (2013), and Christine Kovic (2008). Although they do not use the concepts *exceptionality* or *margins* to describe the relationship of these spaces to the state, they do locate *albergues* at the edges and intersections of various systems.

Coutin (2005) uses the concept of *clandestinity* to describe migrants’ simultaneous presence and absence en route to the United States: their journeys are “hidden, yet known,” because “their presence is prohibited, unauthorized migrants do not fully arrive even when they reach their destinations” (Coutin 2005, 196). She notes how migrant shelters also make up part of this clandestine geography, constructed along migrant travel routes. Coutin’s observation points to the use of migrant shelters as

⁵ This immigration process, officially called *Regularización por Razones Humanitarias*, offers temporary visitor status to victims of grave crimes that occurred within Mexican territory, regardless of the victim’s means of entry into the country. *Regularización Humanitaria*, as I refer to it throughout this thesis, will be described in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. For more, see http://www.inm.gob.mx/static/Tramites/regularizacion/Por_razones_humanitarias.pdf.

meeting points -- not only between journeying bodies, but also between formal and informal cartographies, where the clandestine and official mappings overlap.

Wendy Vogt also describes *albergues* as spaces of juncture, focusing especially on commercial processes that develop there. She investigates the penetration of neoliberal practices into migration journeys through Mexico, and observes that, in addition to serving as “the base for much of the migrant-rights movement,” shelters “have become incorporated into zones of profit” where guides can recruit potential clients (Vogt 2013). Similarly, in her study of risk and migration in post-NAFTA southern Mexico, Christine Kovic also locates *albergues* in southern Mexico as spaces of juncture; for her, they are spaces of intersection of international human rights and neoliberal policy agendas (2008). Connecting global and local injustices, she argues for a decolonial approach to studying the violence of migration, situating migrants’ narratives within political-economic processes functioning at other scales.

Like these ethnographers, I understand *albergues* to be spaces of intersection, overlap, and opening, as they facilitate activities and discourses that operate formally and informally, on multiple scales. The *albergues* which I studied are church-run, and are funded mostly through parish donations. They exist at the threshold of state inclusion and materially manifest marginality: the state cooperates with them even though that cooperation would seem to contradict border enforcement practices elsewhere. Both inside and outside the law, *albergues* exhibit exceptionality, precariously placed within a permitted clandestinity.

This thesis looks at migrant shelters both as spaces of legibility (a two-way process between migrants and the state), and as spaces of creativity and resistance, where migrants develop and share alternative geographies to navigate state boundaries. It is not surprising that margins, flowing outside of state control even as they are partially contained within it, are also spaces where “alternative forms of political action are instituted” (Das & Poole 2004, 19). In the case of undocumented transmigrants in Mexico’s southern border region, this form of political action could be continuing the journey north, moving off official maps and making creative use of the available spaces and routes. Migrants’ paths often shift in relation to expanded border enforcement, available shelter, and transportation options (Casillas 2008). Their choices in navigating border administration and infrastructure demonstrates how individual agency and resistance to statist structuring persist, even (or especially) in the state’s margins.

On a regional level, the relative marginality of southern Mexico has also produced alternative geographies that overlap with migrants’ routes in unique ways. Over the summer of 2016, actions taken by local social movements in Oaxaca coincidentally provided openings for migrants’ increased mobility. Looking at the examples like the CNTE (*Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*, National Coordination of Education Workers) teachers’ union protests, this thesis explores how marginal spaces and regions interact across scales, disrupting state practices in unexpected ways, creating alternative geographies in response to violent state tactics and enforcement of neoliberal agendas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A feminist geopolitical approach to studying state practices calls for the production of embodied knowledge, collaboratively encountered in day-to-day experiences at the margins of the state. To do this, Williams and Massaro observe that many feminist geopolitical geographers choose to use “situated, embodied methodologies,” including ethnography and participant observation (Williams & Massaro 2013, 752). Anthropologists Das and Poole also see ethnography as one of the best suited tools for this task, as it delves “into the realms of the social that are not easily discernible within more formal protocols used by many other disciplines” (Das & Poole 2004, 30).

In her investigation of state border enforcement practices and their impact on offshore asylum seekers, Mountz conducted an ethnography of the state that “uncovers the operation of power at multiple scales and centers,” focusing attention both on the state -- specifically, the bureaucracies that administer immigration policies in Canada--, and on the state’s margins, listening to the stories of asylum seekers and migrants who encounter the state in situations of precarity (Mountz 2010, xxiii). For Mountz, this multi-perspective ethnographic approach is essential to her project of demystifying and re-embodiment the state, making its conflicts and contradictions visible by peopling its otherwise opaque processes.

Due to time constraints and issues of access, I did not adopt Mountz’s method in its entirety, but chose to focus mostly on the “effects of governance, the idea of the state and its reproduction and enactment on the ground,” as told in the narratives of migrants and migrant advocates who often mediate state encounters in Oaxaca, Mexico (Mountz

2010, 149). This methodological approach aligns with that of Das and Poole, who also use ethnography to “undo the state at its territorial and conceptual margins,” rather than from its center (Das & Poole 2004, 30).

As a component of my ethnographic work, I used participant observation in order to generate collaboratively constructed, embodied knowledge that pays attention to place as well as position (detailed further in Chapter 3). This method of research “provides insights into the unwritten rules and complex interaction... often missed by other methods” (McMorran 2012, 493). Narratives are produced and gathered in rhythm with the surrounding environment, and bodies are taken seriously “as both an object of study and a tool through which research is conducted” (McMorran 2012, 493).

Human geographer Jon Anderson argues that it is not only the relationships between bodies (researcher and respondent) that structure conversations and interactions, but also the relationships between bodies, landscape and memory (Anderson 2004). In reference to the method he developed during his fieldwork (“talking-whilst-walking”), Anderson observes that “meanings are sedimented in and through this processual nexus, [and] the physiological movement of the body through place offers the opportunity to literally and metaphorically ‘wander from plans to recollections to observations’ “ (Anderson 2004, quoting Solnit 2001, 5). These conversational wanderings take place between the researcher, respondent and the surroundings. Conceived of not as a “conventional interrogation” but rather as a “collage of collaboration,” talking-whilst-walking and other *in-situ* investigative methods pay attention to people’s responsiveness to landscape without disrupting their rhythms. In this process, the researcher joins routine

activities and already-present conversations instead of re-placing investigations in a separate environment, which might alter the information elicited in such interactions. By joining respondents in their day-to-day activities, it is “possible to overcome traditional interviewer/interviewee power relations to forge something uniquely collaborative” (Anderson 2004).

Following Anderson’s lead, I used research methods that account for the ways place structures the flow of thought and interaction between bodies. Taking cues from informal conversations that came up while I worked as a volunteer at the shelter, I was able to direct my research around the themes and patterns already present in the conversations between staff and migrants there. In this way, I focused research around relevant concerns and priorities of migrants and migrant advocates.

I also employ critical discourse analysis to examine state-level representations of recent changes or developments in border enforcement in southern Mexico. According to van Dijk, critical discourse analysis “is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context...” (1998, 1). It is used to critique the ways “discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (van Dijk 1998, 3). Critical discourse analysis attempts to bridge the gap between everyday interactions with larger networks of power (van Dijk 1998, 4). Thus, by coupling critical discourse analysis with ethnography, this research attempts to destabilize statist representations of its

infrastructure and practices, introducing contrasting realities that are lived in the margins of the state.

Coinciding with other feminist methodologies, critical discourse analysis places importance on the body and positioning of the researcher. “[C]ritical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately to resist social inequality” (1998, 1). This method engages a mode of theorizing that does not pretend to have a “view from nowhere” (Haraway 1988), but rather understands that the scholar is necessarily entangled in a social structure and is produced through social interaction (van Dijk 1998, 2). It takes a critical stance towards traditional (i.e. content-analytical) approaches that do not acknowledge the position of the researcher as influential in the interpretation of the discourse, thereby perpetuating racist, classist, sexist and/or xenophobic stereotypes in interpretation.

However, I have found that positioning myself in relation to research participants and the field site in general is not a simple process. In agreement with Rose (1997), I acknowledge that a merely “transparent reflexivity” that assumes identity and position is fixed and knowable perpetuates the illusion of stagnant subjects that do not shift in their relationality. “Instead, research [might be] seen as constitutive (if not completely so), both of the researcher and of the other involved in the research process” (Rose 1997, 315). The practice of positioning is always uncertain and incomplete; positions shift over time, between bodies, and from place to place. Despite this blurred vision of self and other, it is still important to acknowledge how identity *could*, from an incomplete vantage point, position the researcher and researched in relation to one another. In the following

section, I outline how my research design developed over time, and how my presumed “situatedness” might have varied from encounter to encounter and across space.

RESEARCH SITE AND POSITIONALITY

From June 2016 to August 2016, I conducted research as a participant observer at a migrant shelter in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico, working as a volunteer. I developed my research objectives and questions through informal conversations and everyday activities in the shelter. I also conducted *in situ*, semi-structured interviews with several migrants and migrant advocates, both in the shelter and from the surrounding community, in order to learn more about changes in border enforcement practices over time. With approval from the IRB of the University of Texas at Austin, to protect the safety of migrants and migrant advocates, no names or specific identifying information was gathered. As an ethnography of the state from the margins, interviews do not focus on complete personal narratives so much as they do on encounters with the state, at the shelter and in the migration journey. Themes in our conversations included the difficulty of traveling from the southern Mexican border to the *albergue*, their experience moving through administrative processes to receive temporary visitor status in Mexico, and their doubts or hesitations on whether to continue their journeys north, to stay in Mexico or to return to their home countries.

When first designing my research, I had originally planned to investigate the gendered differences in migrating through an increasingly militarized border landscape, focusing especially on ways of coping with the threat of gendered violence en route.

However, upon arriving at the field site it became clear that there were very few migrant women staying at the shelter regularly -- one woman arrived for every ten men --, a pattern that differed from broader trends indicating Central American women's increased migration to the United States.⁶ There were many days when no women-identifying migrants were present, thus making a gendered analysis of migration difficult to carry out. Furthermore, because most migrants stayed at the shelter for no more than three days at a time, to me it did not seem possible to build enough rapport to talk about the most difficult -- potentially traumatic -- aspects of their journey, such as coping with threat of gendered violence. In light of these limitations, I chose to redirect my research around issues and concerns that emerged in casual conversations at the shelter, which tended to focus less on violence already experienced en route and more on the everyday difficulties of moving further ahead.

My volunteer duties shifted during my time researching at the shelter, and often depended on the number of migrants present, the events scheduled that week, and (sometimes) the level of political turbulence in the region. When I first arrived in June 2016, there were very few migrants staying there, and my main volunteer duty was to accompany shelter staff and migrants to the *Mercado de Abastos*, the largest market in the city, to ask for food donations for the week (described at greater length in Chapter 3). Upon returning to the shelter, we would separate and organize produce together in the kitchen, while others cleaned and cooked. Much like Chris McMorran's (2012)

⁶ Shelter workers did confirm that the number of women traveling through this *albergue* had increased in recent years, even if the number was low in comparison with more general trends of Central American women's migration through Mexico.

description of his “working participant observation” research method, these weekly walks to and through the market were one of the best opportunities to get to know people staying at the shelter.

From time to time, groups of university students or other foreign solidarity groups would visit the shelter for a day and I would be asked to help translate during their visits. It was common that staff and migrants would share their personal histories and migration experiences during formal presentations given to these groups. These presentations were reminiscent of *testimonios*, “urgent oral accounts bearing witness to wrongs committed against the speakers” (Stephen 2011). Speakers would offer personal narratives of their flight from violence or corruption in their home countries and abuse they endured en route to the shelter, sometimes at the hands of Mexican authorities.

When there were no visitors, my work routine varied from day to day. I was asked to organize the *bodega*, where they kept clothes, backpacks, shoes, blankets and other donations, and occasionally translated documents for the shelter office. I also developed a large directory of migrant assistance services in the U.S, intended to link migrants with helpful organizations in their prospective destinations, and put together a pocket-sized pamphlet of migrants’ rights in the U.S.

While I remain uncertain of the particularities of others’ perceptions and reception of my involvement in the shelter, I am certain that my positioning as a mostly white, U.S.-based academic shaped the conversations and dynamics between myself, migrants, shelter staff, and other advocates around Oaxaca City. For instance, upon my first visit to the shelter in March 2016, I was abruptly confronted with the sharp difference in my

experience from the majority of people I met in the field site. Although already acutely aware of my relative socio-political power as an educated *gringa*, the point was driven home in a conversation I had with two men migrating to the U.S. from Guatemala. One of the men had lived in the U.S. for a number of years and was traveling back after being deported; the other man, younger than the first, was migrating across borders for the first time. They were both headed to North Dakota. The younger man asked me how long it had taken me to get to Oaxaca from Texas. Without thinking much, I counted the hours out loud: one and a half hour drive from Austin to San Antonio, a four hour flight from San Antonio to Mexico City, with a layover in Monterrey, and another one hour flight from Mexico City to Oaxaca, totaling six and a half hours to move from the south of the U.S. to the south of Mexico.

The absurdity of the asymmetry of our mobility struck me in this moment, as they joked about hiding themselves in my luggage on the return flight. While their journey would last days, weeks, or possibly months, mine lasted roughly a quarter of a day. For me, moving across borders is as easy as buying a plane ticket and flashing my passport at customs; for them, it might involve thousands of dollars in coyote costs, physical exhaustion and the risk of losing their lives. It reminded me of Doreen Massey's observation that "different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (Massey 1994, 3). Although cognitively aware of

these severe differences in experience before arriving in Oaxaca, in this moment I embodied that knowledge in new ways.

I was clearly an outsider in the shelter, but my presence was not out of the ordinary or even unexpected for shelter staff or migrants. Several people staying there mentioned that they had met volunteers like me at other *albergues*: some from Germany, others from Spain and others still from central or northern Mexico. One person asked me if I was a journalist -- he had been interviewed by foreign reporters while riding trains further south -- but when I explained that I was a student researcher, he didn't seem very surprised. These interactions revealed my position among many other young and foreign volunteers, journalists and researchers who have become common features in the Mexico transmigration network. As such, I assumed an identity that had already accumulated associations -- some negative, some positive -- due to the precedent set by others conducting parallel work.

My gender identity did allow me to better establish connections with women at the shelter in part because, as a woman, I was permitted to enter their dormitory. I would regularly introduce myself to the few women staying there, and offered them information about migrants' rights and protections upon entering the U.S., knowledge I had gleaned from my previous work experience as an immigrant's rights paralegal in the United States. I made this information available to everyone at the shelter, but had more opportunities to share it with women who tended to remain at the shelter with their kids while others left to work for the day. In effect, I drew upon knowledge obtained through my difference as a way to offer something concrete and immediately useful (in contrast to

the abstract utility of the future results of this investigation). Sometimes people staying at the shelter wanted to chat for hours, sometimes they preferred not to, for reasons that partially, but not exclusively, could be tied to my identity.

Migrants at the shelter were not homogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity or class. Some people were indigenous; most people were mestizo; a few had a *güero/güera* appearance (light skin, blue eyes), others were Afro-descendent, and one man identified as Garifuna. Officially, the *albergue* also offered refuge to Mexicans migrating within the country or heading to the U.S., although their presence at the shelter was very rare. The people staying at the shelters had formerly worked as government administrators, business owners, taxi drivers, military soldiers, students, musicians, and *pandilleros* (people affiliated with a gang). Their experiences and identities varied greatly.

In this context of diversity, I did not stand out as severely as I did elsewhere in the city, which has one of the highest densities of indigenous peoples in the country (32% of city residents speak an indigenous language, compared to 7% of the national population) (INEGI 2016). At the shelter, it was sometimes assumed I was from another part of Mexico or Latin America until I explained otherwise (or until they heard my accented Spanish). Elsewhere in the city, it was immediately apparent that I was not from there.

The significance of my positioning as a U.S.-based volunteer and researcher shifted in encounters with people I met outside the shelter. In the *albergue* I assumed an identity that was somewhat ordinary and expected; however, elsewhere in the city, my outsider positioning was defined in contrast to whom I was presumed to be. Although there are many foreigners from all over the world in Oaxaca's capital, I did not fit the

typical profile of tourist or ex-pat artist (of which there are many). Upon learning about my work as a student researcher of migration, many locals seemed confused or surprised -- few of them even knew about the migrant shelter located in their city. Some mentioned that they had family members who had crossed the US-Mexico border; others voiced their support of the work, which they deemed to be important; a few responded in silence, perhaps hinting at the heaviness of the topic and its history in Oaxaca (Stephen 2007; Van Ramshorst 2014).

These latter encounters often led me to question my involvement in migration issues outside of my home country -- why not study the enforcement of the U.S. border? Why travel abroad to study a practice that is just as problematic in my home state of Texas? As a result of struggling with these questions, this thesis attempts to trace lines of accountability between practices on the ground and international security agreements, paying attention to the ways that the U.S. has influenced immigration policy in Mexico.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This thesis is organized into five chapters, which move between analysis of official state discourse concerning the 2011 Migration Law and *Programa Frontera Sur*, and migrant and migrant-advocate reflections on border navigation in southern Mexico. In Chapter 2, I use critical discourse analysis to examine state-level representations of changes in immigration administration and border enforcement, focusing especially on the latest stream of border policies under *Programa Frontera Sur*. This chapter examines statements made by politicians involved in the administration of border policy, the

construction and spatial arrangement of new border infrastructure, and the legal structuring of migration and border enforcement in Mexico. Drawing on the work of Wendy Brown, I argue that Mexico's official border narrative is defined in contradistinction to that of the United States, despite the two countries' increased collaboration. As an examination of discourse at the "center" of the 2011 Migration Law and *Programa Frontera Sur*, this chapter serves as a point of comparison for the subsequent chapters' study of the state's margins, exposing moments of intersection and contradiction between official narratives and migrants' lived experiences.

In Chapter 3, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork to examine how the state is encountered and experienced both in administration of immigration policy and in navigating border enforcement infrastructure. Following the work of Das, Poole and Mountz, it argues that in its margins the state strategically uses *visibility* and *illegibility* to confuse and exhaust migrants who attempt to navigate through its legal and infrastructural networks. According to official state narratives (described in Chapter 2), migrants are afforded certain rights and protections that might be used to safely move through the region; however, as made evident in this research of migrants' everyday engagements with the state, they are perpetually kept in zones of uncertainty and exception.

These zones of uncertainty overlap with spaces of creativity, where migrants exercise their agency as they generate alternative mappings of increased mobility. In Chapter 4, I discuss the ways that *albergues* serve as points of intersection between official and unofficial geographies, serving as a liminal space that migrants creatively use

to move in and outside the state's line of sight. This chapter also explores the ways that creativity is enhanced through the overlap of marginal zones across scale, unintentionally interfering with statist border enforcement and policing practices, and widening opportunities for migrants' mobility. Specifically, I examine the alternative geographies produced during the CNTE teachers' union protests, and look at how marginal spaces (the region of southern Mexico) and marginalized bodies (those of indigenous, rural Mexicans as well as those of Central American migrants) engage with each other in response to neoliberal state practices deployed at other scales.

This thesis concludes by reviewing its contributions to feminist geopolitical geography and ethnographies of the state. Drawing attention to the grounded, embodied experiences encountered in the margins, this thesis explores how conflicting policy agendas mobilized at other scales produce landscapes of uncertainty for migrants navigating Mexico's infrastructural and administrative borders. I recapitulate how, despite the confusion produced through the illegibility of the state, creativity in the margins persists, enabling the mapping of alternative geographies and mobilities. This final chapter argues that there is room for alliances across scales and locales, and that migrants' accounts discussed in this thesis expose one of many margins, all of which need to be critically investigated. I suggest potential questions for future investigation, connecting the conclusions of this thesis with an emerging political context in which migration restrictions and prohibitions have increased, now inflected with overt racism and xenophobia.

Chapter II: State Narratives and Infrastructure at the Southern Border

INTRODUCTION

Before moving to the margins of the state where my ethnographic fieldwork is based, in this chapter I examine “official” border narratives told at other scales of analysis. Although these stories are produced and projected through distinct media and spaces, they are clustered around central state actors, and form an image of border enforcement in southern Mexico as coherent, ordered and humane. However, there are traces of contradiction within the state’s official border discourse, lines which might be connected to the confusion and uncertainty experienced by migrants in their grounded journeys through the border landscape. This chapter is not a comprehensive investigation of the ways that state narratives and performance of sovereignty shape migrants’ experience, but rather it suggests several discursive threads to follow between areas of analysis -- both at the center and the margins.

My choice to draw connections *between* narratives rather than to situate everyday stories *within* official discourses is informed by the work of Bruno Latour, who emphasizes the “‘networky’ shape” of scalar relations in his book *Reassembling the Social* (2005, 178). Latour writes that “the macro is neither ‘above’ nor ‘below’ ...[local] interactions, but *added* to them as *another* of their connections, feeding them and feeding off them” (177). According to Latour’s theory of the social, scholars should avoid dividing data “in two heaps: one local and one global,” because “there exists no place that can be said to be ‘non-local.’ If something is ‘de-localized,’ it means that it is being sent

from one place to some *other* place, not from one place to *no* place” (178, 179). This conjecture aligns with the feminist geopolitical approach, which emphasizes the importance of grounding the state in material time-spaces, rather than allowing it to inflate and float overhead, opaque, impenetrable and all powerful. Instead, by “flattening” relations and drawing connections horizontally (in this case, from the margins to the center of the state), we disturb the usual vertical division between “local” and “global,” and thus re-structure “context” as connectivity rather than as a framing of events and activity.

By examining some of the state’s narratives surrounding border enforcement in southern Mexico, this chapter raises questions concerning the distinct political objectives at work in mobilizing this increase in border enforcement. It illuminates the intersection of multiple political projects that involve the maintenance of state sovereignty, both in terms of control over who and what crosses territorial borders, *and* in relation to other nation-states. In some ways, these agendas diverge. On the one hand, increased border enforcement is used to facilitate the flow of “legitimate” trade between states, a project conducted in partnership with the United States and other neighboring countries. On the other hand, Mexican border enforcement is consistently framed in contradistinction from that of its northern neighbor; Mexican state narratives work to distance its border enforcement and immigration regulation practices from those of the U.S.

These narratives are generated discursively and materially: in the words of politicians, the letter of the law, as well as in the construction and operation of border infrastructure. They are projected to distinct audiences, at differing volumes, through

diverse media. The louder narratives, heard in the politicians' official statements and in recent changes to immigration law, project an image of humanitarian concern for migrants' rights. The quieter narrative, echoed only subtly in the politicians' narratives and more obviously in the built environment of the border region, betrays an intertwining of neoliberal interests and international security agendas, which the U.S. has taken the lead in directing. These conflicting narratives interact to produce a landscape of uncertainty for migrants, whose position within the state oscillates between inclusion and exclusion, as a "protected" people with certain rights, even as they are detained and deported at increasingly higher rates.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

This chapter employs critical discourse analysis to trace connections between several centralized arenas of border-making in southern Mexico. As mentioned in the Introduction, a critical approach to discourse analysis pays attention to the ways that certain communicative practices reinforce power hierarchies and social inequalities (van Dijk 1998). More conventional approaches to discourse analysis examine language as the primary vehicle for shaping meaning and ideology. However, I follow the work of discourse scholars who also emphasize the importance of the material in shaping discourse in a co-constitutive process.

This thesis contends that discourse is *performative*: it "focuses attention on the ongoing, dynamic, relational enactment of the world" rather than merely on the relationships of its representation (Orlikowski and Scott 2015, 700). It is a process, a

“series of critical encounters... rather than a singular event,” and thus meaning shifts, deepens and expands, ever-emergent and interactive (Steacy, Williams, Petterson, Kurtz 2015, 169). Scholars Orlikowski and Scott draw on the work of Karen Barad to explore *material-discursive practices*, understood as matter and meaning’s mutual entanglement (Orlikowski and Scott 2015). According to Barad, “discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another, but rather, the material and discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamic of *intra-activity*” (Barad 2009, 140). This *intra-activity* refers to the continuous, performative enactment of the boundaries separating subjects and objects as agency “flows” between them (Barad 2009, 138). Barad argues that the discursive “is not what is said,” but rather is:

that which is constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements. Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects *emerge* from fields of possibility (Barad 2009, 137).

In the case of this chapter, I do not intend to trace a detailed genealogy of the material-discursive becoming of the southern border of Mexico, but I do acknowledge that this process is indeed ongoing, and agree with Barad, Orlikowski and Scott that it is not limited to language or utterances. Discursive practices do not occur in a passive material context framing subjects’ activity. Rather, matter and meaning are mutually articulated in performative processes.

Although my analysis of the first two arenas – politicians’ statements and immigration law – centers on narratives that are spoken or written, I focus attention on how they give shape to material events and spaces. At the third site of analysis I examine

the physical infrastructure of southern Mexico's borderlands, including how it is spatially arranged and managed. These structures gain meaning in part through their everyday operation, but also through the discourses that are deployed at other scales regarding their purported purpose.

While this is not a comprehensive investigation of border discourse in Mexico, this chapter attempts to illuminate some of the ways the state enacts territorial boundaries both discursively and materially. In these state performances, multiple narratives are generated; in some instances they overlap, but in others they seem to diverge. In all cases, they form part of the landscape that migrants must navigate when crossing through southern Mexico, and thus provide a good starting point for tracing connections between sites of border-making, from the center to the periphery.

FIRST ARENA OF ANALYSIS: POLITICIANS' STATEMENTS CONCERNING PFS⁷

In May 2015, at a press conference held in front of a newly constructed Center for Comprehensive Attention for Border Transit (CAITF)⁸ in La Trinitaria, Chiapas, the Secretary of the Interior Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong announced the success *Programa*

⁷ *Programa Frontera Sur* (PFS), the series of policies aimed at "ordering" the flows of people and goods through the southern border region of Mexico, is not the first attempt at enhancing border enforcement in southern Mexico. Increased surveillance and economic development of the southern border region has been a topic of concern for the past three presidential administrations, beginning with Vicente Fox, Felipe Calderón and continuing with Peña Nieto. While pressure from the U.S. to seal the southern border has been constant, the reasons for establishing increased control have varied. However, what remains clear is the continued interest in deterring migrants from reaching the northern border of Mexico. For more, see Villafuerte Solís & García Aguilar 2015.

⁸ Also referred to as "super-checkpoints," the CAITFs are newly constructed, massive compounds located along main highways; they house up to eight federal agencies, including the INM, the Federal Police and the Navy, and are intended to enhance security through increased surveillance of border flows. For more on the CAITFs, see the following section.

Frontera Sur, begun nearly nine months earlier by President Enrique Peña Nieto. Osorio Chong reviewed the objectives of the border plan, summarized as: 1) to bring order to the cross-border flows of goods and people, and 2) to protect the human rights of migrants who move through the southern border region (SEGOB May 11, 2015). The Secretary of the Interior argued that *Programa Frontera Sur* had indeed achieved this goal, and was gaining international attention as a result. He concluded the press conference with the statement: “We do not build fences, but rather unifying bridges between neighboring countries” (SEGOB May 11, 2015).

This statement is powerful not only because it symbolically transforms the CAITF into a “bridge,” but also because it evokes -- and contrasts with -- the U.S. border fence. This statement is a declaration of difference between approaches to border enforcement, implicitly comparing U.S. and Mexican policies while deepening the connections between Mexico and the Central American countries beyond the southern border.

Osorio Chong’s framing of *Programa Frontera Sur* echoes earlier statements issued at the program’s initiation in July 2014. President Enrique Peña Nieto, along with the Guatemalan president Otto Pérez Molina and Mexican federal and state officials, met in Playas de Catzajá, Chiapas, to inaugurate the operation of the CAITF located there. The CAITF would be a center-piece of the new border enforcement policies under *Programa Frontera Sur*, the announcement of which immediately followed U.S. media descriptions of a “wave” or “surge” in migration from Central America to the U.S. as well as President Obama’s declaration of an “urgent humanitarian situation” at the U.S.-Mexico border (Zezima and O’Keefe 2014).

At this event, *Programa Frontera Sur* was repeatedly described as a regional collaboration project aimed at enhancing connection between “sibling” Mesoamerican countries. Each of the dignitaries at the event referred to nationals of their neighboring countries as brothers and sisters. The Chiapas governor Manuel Velasco extended this relation of intimacy to migrants as well, naming them “nuestras hermanas y hermanos migrantes” (our sister and brother migrants) (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). The Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, noted how Mexicans and Central Americans share “history and culture” as well as “values and dreams,” connecting them as descendents of the Mayas and Olmecs (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). President Enrique Peña Nieto and Secretary of the Interior Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong similarly drew parallels between Mexico and Central American countries’ shared histories as nations of emigration, even as they noted the recent shift towards return and transit migration in Mexico. These statements discursively function to bring Mexico into closer proximity with its southern neighbors, emphasizing unity in shared history, perspective and goals.

At the same time, President Otto Pérez Molina hinted not so subtly at the difference between Mexico’s and other nations’ approaches to border governance. In his speech, the Guatemalan president stated that the “humanitarian vision” of border enforcement put forward by Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration differs from other countries’ treatment of borders and members of neighboring countries (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). According to Pérez Molina, Enrique Peña Nieto’s vision of border enforcement is an “example for other countries,” and a “model of successful

migration” (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). He stated, “instead of obstacles, there is facilitation” of development, and “instead of putting up walls, [Enrique Peña Nieto] has had a vision of unity” (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). The call for unity across borders is implicitly contrasted with closure and separation, evoked in the image of *walls*, which brings the U.S. border discourse to mind. By calling *Programa Frontera Sur* a “model” for other countries to follow, President Pérez Molina discursively distances Mexico’s border policy from those of fenced nations.

This same sentiment is heard in Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong’s May 2015 speech in La Trinitaria, Chiapas. The declaration that Mexico builds *bridges*, not *fences*, performatively re-frames the southern border of Mexico as a space of humane treatment of migrants,⁹ attributed in part to its shared culture and indigenous roots, and in part to its shared history as nations of emigration to the U.S. These statements position Mexican border enforcement practices as distinct from those of countries with walls and fences. Importantly, the CAITF of La Trinitaria and Playas de Catazajá where both the July 2014 and May 2015 press conferences took place are framed *not* as a means of blocking movement between nations, but rather as means of facilitating such flows; their power is not derived from their capacity to impede movement, but rather to allow it to occur through legitimate (i.e. legal) routes.

⁹ This position of humanitarian concern also serves to combat the image of Mexico as a country of widespread abuse of migrants, by organized criminals and law enforcement authorities alike. Migrant advocacy network REDODEM found that in 2015, 41.5% of the crimes against migrants were committed by law enforcement. For more, see REDODEM 2015, Amnesty International 2010, García Aguilar 2011.

Performance of Sovereignty

In her book *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown argues that the fencing fetish, apparent in countries like the U.S., Israel, and across Europe, arises from a fear of nation-state impotence when confronting seemingly unstoppable global flows (Brown 2014, 114). “In the face of an increasingly unbounded and uncontrolled global order, walls figure containment that exceeds mere protection against dangerous invaders and that pertains instead to a psychic unmanageability of living in such a world... Walling phantasmatically produces shelter when the actual boundaries of the nation cease to be containing...” (Brown 2014, 118).

In Brown’s analysis, the appearance of visible barricades on nation-state lines serves as a performance of sovereignty -- a theatrical display of control, containment and division between the inside and outside of the territory, forming the basis of legitimacy of the nation-state. However, in the case of the southern border of Mexico, I argue that the *absence* of fences and walls is also a display of sovereign power. Especially in light of U.S. officials’ publicized statements naming the Guatemalan-Mexican border as now the U.S.’s “third border” (Treviño 2012; García Aguilar 2011), Mexico’s public rejection of the fence/wall image in their border discourse serves to portray *Programa Frontera Sur* as separate and free from the U.S.’s policy impositions, despite the fact that over \$100 million dollars’ worth of U.S. equipment and training has been directed to the southern border region of Mexico (Ribando Seelke & Finklea 2017, 15).

Threads of Multiple Narratives

There are traces of contradiction and divergence subtly woven into the “humanitarian” framing of *Programa Frontera Sur*: narratives of security and development are incorporated as means to increase migrants’ safety, even though in their realization they might present further harms to migrants. In his speech at the July 2014 meeting, Secretary of Foreign Affairs José Antonio Meade Kuribreña emphasized not only Mexico and Central America’s “shared values and dreams,” but *also* their shared “economies and societies” (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). He focused on *Programa Frontera Sur*’s potential to create “prosperous, inclusive and secure” Mesoamerican nations, achieved in large part through the build-up of border infrastructure (like the CAITFs), as well as energy infrastructure, which would promote the flow commerce and investment in their countries (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014).

Similarly, President Otto Pérez Molina praised Enrique Peña Nieto’s “vision of development,” especially his implementation of a free worker visa program that would allow Guatemalans and Belizeans to work in the border states of southern Mexico. The Tarjeta de Trabajador Fronterizo (Border Worker Visa) would permit nationals from any part of the border countries -- not just the departments located on the border-line, as had been previously permitted -- to cross with their families into the border states in Mexico (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). In 2008, the work visa program had been expanded to include migrant laborers outside of agricultural industries, accommodating anticipated shifts in regional development (Alba and Castillo 2012, 4). In his speech,

Enrique Peña Nieto stated that his administration was working to extend the border worker visa to Honduras and El Salvador, the two other nations that have had a significant increase in migration through Mexico in recent years.

Although only alluded to in these statements under the terms “commerce” and “investment,” a number development projects have been proposed for the southern region of Mexico as part of Enrique Peña Nieto’s National Development Plan for years 2013-2018. In an interview with *El Universal*, Humberto Mayans Canabal, the former leader of the Coordination for Comprehensive Attention for Migrants at the Southern Border (established shortly after the announcement of *Programa Frontera Sur*), stated that of the 187 projects destined for the southern border region, nearly half are infrastructure projects, including the “modernizing” of the railroads as well as ports of entry (Torres 2015). The additional projects proposed might include tourism, energy and extractive industries (Gobierno de la República 2013; SEDATU 2014).

In these politicians’ statements, “development” is often mentioned in conjunction with “security” – it would seem that one cannot occur without the other. Both, supposedly, would increase migrants’ safety and protect their interests by bringing previously informal or clandestine activities into the legal folds of the state (i.e. the Border Worker Visa program). In the 2015 press conference at Playas de Catanzajá, Miguel Osorio Chong dramatically stated that *before Programa Frontera Sur*, “there was no order, there was no coordination, it wasn’t known who were entering into Mexico, what their destination was, what their origin was, [they] had no data with respect to those who passed through or visited [their] country” (SEGOB May 11, 2015). He goes on to

immediately connect this lack of formal attention and surveillance to “the abuse of migrants” (ibid.).

Several of the politicians at the July 2014 event linked security to the build-up of border infrastructure, including enhancement of information systems and technology. The implication is that with knowledge of the identities of those who cross borders, the dangerous people might be sorted from the desirable. Meade Kuribreña specifically mentioned plans to coordinate and standardize equipment across borders in Central America in order to “register and exchange migration data” (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014). In this context, President Pérez Molina referenced the purpose of GANSEF (Grupo Alto Nivel de Seguridad Fronteriza), which has organized the transmission of migration data between member nations in “real time” (ibid.). He stated that with mechanisms like these in place, higher levels of security can be achieved in the region.

The question remains as to *what* was causing such insecurity in the first place. Unlike border narratives in the U.S., which have focused on the threat posed by migrants themselves (Chavez 2008), in the case of *Programa Frontera Sur* in Mexico, the presumed danger of lax border enforcement remains much more nebulous. Although references were made to the dangers of organized crime and human trafficking (i.e. in Manuel Velasco Coello’s speech), it was also acknowledged by Miguel Osorio Chong in his 2015 speech that the southern Mexican states have some of the lowest rates of violent crime in the country (Presidencia de la República July 7, 2014; SEGOB May 11, 2015).¹⁰

¹⁰ While this assertion might be true with regard to permanent residents of the region, it almost certainly does not take into account the large number of crimes committed against migrants, which include robbery,

Furthermore, if we accept the assertion that security is intended especially for migrants' safety, as the politicians suggest, it becomes concerning that few specific mechanisms for the protection of migrants' rights were mentioned in these speeches. Rather, the focus was on the building-up of security infrastructure, like the CAITFs, and the sharing of database registries between nations. As far as social services for migrants are concerned, Enrique Peña Nieto did mention the expansion of medical services for migrants in Chiapas and the possibility of updating DIF (National System for Comprehensive Family Development) *albergues* and detention centers, where migrants are held before deportation. However, at this time he did not mention accountability systems for investigating government officials accused of exploiting migrants, or providing social services to victims of crimes in transit.

In this border discourse, "security" is associated with surveillance -- knowledge of who and what passes through nation-state territories. "Order" is the desired outcome, and although it is rhetorically associated with migrants' rights, it is functionally focused on increasing the scope of official information and providing regulated avenues for migrating regionally. As the Secretary of the Interior stated in his speech, the goals of *Programa Frontera Sur* are to bring informal activities of the margins into the legal folds of the state, implicitly under the sovereign jurisdiction of the state. In this way, the "ordering" of the southern border of Mexico is a performance of sovereignty -- a

assault, and rape, most of which has gone unreported to authorities until the past two years (Knippen, Boggs & Meyer 2015).

response to the push and pull of neoliberal processes that have opened up the region to international investment and development.

Absence in Discourse: What was not said?

While much of this chapter has focused on what was said in the public statements concerning *Programa Frontera Sur*, what was *not* said is equally important in the shaping of Mexico's southern border narrative. The politicians repeatedly referenced the objective of bringing order, inclusivity and prosperity to Mexico and Central America, and emphasized the importance of coordinated security on a regional level. However, they did not mention that many of the infrastructural updates planned at ports of entry, border crossings and at the CAITFs would be carried out with U.S. assistance. The announcement of *Programa Frontera Sur* and the inauguration of the CAITF followed President Obama's declaration of Central American migration as an "urgent humanitarian situation" by weeks (Zezima & O'Keefe 2014).¹¹ Through the Mérida Initiative, over \$2.5 billion US dollars have been funneled to Mexican security forces in the form of equipment, training and technology from FY2008 to FY2015 (Ribando Seelke & Finklea 2016). Around 2011, funding provided through this initiative was increasingly directed to the southern border of Mexico specifically, now totaling over \$100 million, including the development of biometric technology intended to help agencies gather and share

¹¹ In September 2016, President Obama reportedly thanked Mexico for "absorbing a great number of refugees from Central America" (Nakamura 2016). Although officials have denied the United States' direct funding of PFS, it has been clear that Mérida Initiative funding intended to build a "21st Century Border" has been extended to include Mexico's southern border, most likely under pressure of Obama's administration (Weiss 2016).

information on “criminals and migrants” (Ribando Seelke & Finklea 2017, 15; Villafuerte Solís & García Aguilar 2015).

By erasing the U.S.’s role in enhancing border surveillance, these statements work against claims that the Mexican-Guatemalan-Belizean border is the U.S.’s “third border,” currently operating with funding, training and technology made available by the U.S. government (García Aguilar 2011). Furthermore, by contrasting their “humanitarian,” fenceless approach with that of the United States, the Mexican government claims distance from U.S. border policy plans, and performatively asserts its sovereignty as a nation-state with a unique approach to migration. At the same time, it visibly asserts sovereign control over its territory, which serves as the foundation for establishing and maintaining legitimacy as a nation-state.

In summary, the border narratives that surface in these speeches emphasize Mexico’s unique and differentiated “humanitarian” approach to migration, implicitly contrasted with the U.S.’s border enforcement tactics, even as they emphasize union between Mesoamerican nations. Protection of migrants’ rights is coupled with plans for increased security and development; the former objective is framed as an ordering of the flows of the latter. Security is a means of bringing the illicit activities of the margins into the legal folds of the state; it is both a facilitation of trade (meant to encourage local migration), and a surveillance of who and what crosses nation-state borders. In this way, the politicians theatrically perform sovereignty as a staging of control over the territory, both in regard to the traffic of goods and labor and in regard to the imposition of external security agendas (evidenced in their rejection of “fences” and “walls”).

I do not argue that these speeches actually establish state sovereignty, but rather that they serve as “political gestures,” theatrical demonstrations suggesting control over the territory (Brown 2014, 91). As I will describe later in this chapter, the threads of these narratives, once unraveled from the broader border discourse, diverge or run into conflict with each other. In the following section, I will outline how recent changes in immigration law similarly reflect the narratives described in these statements -- the projection of an image of humanitarian concern, and differentiation from the U.S.’s approach to border enforcement. In the final section, I will explore the material manifestation of these policies and laws -- the construction and administration of border infrastructure in southern Mexico -- where the threads of these narratives appear to unravel.

SECOND ARENA OF ANALYSIS: RECENT CHANGES IN IMMIGRATION LAW IN MEXICO

The politicians’ emphasis on protection of migrants’ human rights is also apparent in recent changes in Mexico’s immigration laws. Like the *Programa Frontera Sur* border enforcement policies, these changes have been heralded as examples of humane approaches to immigration, contrasted with those of the United States. It is held up as evidence that Mexico does not espouse a xenophobic, closed door attitude towards migrants, but rather one that promotes equality and protection of human rights.

The country’s first comprehensive migration law was passed in 2011, after successful advocacy efforts made by “actors from civil society, government and the international community” (Global Detention Project 2013). The passage of the law came

on the heels of the widely-publicized tragedy: in August 2010, authorities discovered a clandestine gravesite of 72 murdered Central American migrants in Tamaulipas, northern Mexico. As the event garnered international attention, it generated the criticism that Mexico was hypocritical in its demands for better treatment of its emigrants in the U.S., considering violence against transmigrants was rampant within its own borders. In part as a response to this critique, and in part as a result of ongoing advocacy efforts from civil-society organizations, the 2011 *Ley de Migración* (Migration Law) was approved by Mexico's Congress "in a rare unanimous vote" (Alba 2013).¹²

Formerly, issues surrounding transmigration through Mexico fell under the jurisdiction of the 1974 *Ley General de Población* (General Population Law), which focused mostly on legal enforcement and regulation of migration into the country. It was seen as "an instrument of vigilance, focused on regulating the entry, stay, voluntary exit, and forced expulsion of foreigners from Mexico" (Gonzalez-Murphy & Koslowski 2011, 4). Until reforms were made in 2008, this law also made migration without documentation a federal crime, punishable with up to 10 years in prison (13). Although this provision was rarely enforced, the 2008 reform "demoted the felony offense to an administrative infraction with a fine of up to 5,000 pesos...", resulting symbolically in the decriminalization of migration (13). However, in the "absence of further migration

¹² Although the law was passed in 2011, its implementation began in November 2012 (Carte 2013). Migrant rights organizations have noted that some of the protections provided in the law, such as *Regularización Humanitaria*, discussed in greater depth in the following chapter, were not enacted in vigor until recently. For instance, WOLA noted that in 2013, only 277 *tarjetas humanitarias* were issued, while in 2016 the number grew to 3,971 (for more, see <https://www.charts.datawrapper.wola.org/VdgH8/>; and Unidad de Política Migratoria 2016). Experts contend that this delay in application of the law is due to an initial lack of funding and training for state officials.

legislation at that time, [the reform] changed very little on the ground” (Rodríguez & Jonas 2014, 111).

In contrast, the new 2011 *Ley de Migración* makes human rights protection and the combat of discrimination its explicit intention. According to the new law, “all immigrants, regardless of their status are granted the right to access education and health services...[as well as] the right to due process” (González-Murphy and Koslowski 2011, 19). Although medical services and means to address human rights violations had been incorporated into federal and some state laws prior to 2011, the new law includes new mechanisms to enforce these rights, including the creation of an office of the Prosecutor within the Solicitor General’s Office (the *Procuraduría General de la República*), which focuses on “investigating crimes against migrants and protection of their human rights” (Carte 2013, 88; Gonzalez-Murphy & Koslowski 2011, 19).

The 2011 Migration Law also reinforces earlier attempts to centralize and standardize procedures of the National Migration Institute (INM), the SEGOB-surrogate agency in charge of migration-related issues. The new standardized approach, originally established as part of an Institutional Transformation Plan of the INM, would combat internal corruption resulting from the discretionary powers of local INM authorities, as permitted under the 1974 General Population Law (Gonzalez-Murphy & Koslowski 2011, 14). It also requires the use of online application procedures, streamlined through a “new centralized information system...that replaced the many stand-alone systems in INM offices throughout Mexico” (14).

Politicians framed the 2011 Migration Law as a victory for migrants' rights that might be held up as an example for other nations to follow. Upon the bill's submission to Mexico's Congress in 2010, Senator Rubén Velásquez of the PRD stated that the law, if passed, "would become Mexico's voice to the world on how migrants should be treated" (Michele & Gómez 2010). Similarly, when signing the bill into law, then President Felipe Calderón stated that

"...the Mexican government is doing what we have requested for many years; for example, from the United States: decriminalize migration and pay attention more sensibly and sensitively to the complex reality we live" (Alba and Castillo 2012, 17).

Like the discourse surrounding *Programa Frontera Sur*, these statements reflect a border narrative based in humanitarian concern for migrants, defined in contrast with the immigration laws of the United States.

Threads of Contradiction

Although the Migration Law is widely regarded as a step in the right direction with respect to migrants' rights, some civil society organizations and academics have identified room for contradiction in the new law. In their 2012 report *La Detención de Personas Extranjeras en Estaciones Migratorias*, the organization Sin Fronteras A.C. noted certain inconsistencies between the constitution and the 2011 Migration law concerning the legality and amount of time that migrants might be lawfully detained. They argue that privation of liberty (i.e. detention for non-criminal offences) is forbidden under Articles 21 and 16 of the Constitution; however, the INM holds that the detention

(*aseguramiento*) of migrants is not a privation of liberty, but rather a restriction on free transit, which is constitutionally permitted (Sin Fronteras 2012, 8). The organization also observed that under the new law, migrants' documentation status would be decided within a period of 15 days; many migrants are not released until their migratory status is determined, at the end of the two-week period, even though the Constitution states that administrative detention can last no longer than 36 hours (Sin Fronteras 2012, 8).

Similarly, the organization Insyde A.C. (El Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia) found certain provisions of the Migration Law to be either too weak or even contradictory in terms of protection of migrants' rights. The decriminalization of migrants was symbolically established in the prohibition of migrant detention in jails (in contrast with detention practices in the U.S.) and in granting the INM exclusive jurisdiction over apprehension and detention of irregular migrants (and thereby prohibiting police and military from doing so). Since 2008, the INM no longer uses lethal weapons in its operations, thus distinguishing its duties from those of agencies responsible for criminal law enforcement. However, as pointed out in a 2013 Insyde report, in the Migration Law regulations, the INM can ask for assistance in their operations from other law enforcement agencies, like the Federal Police (Wolf 2013, 35). Furthermore, although the INM is unarmed, they have continued to use force in the detaining of migrants; in some cases, they have even used tasers in migrant apprehension operations (Wolf 2013, 35; Isacson, Meyer & Smith 2015). Migrant advocacy networks also report that extortion, sexual assault and even kidnapping by federal officials

continues to be a severe problem for migrants transiting Mexico (Knippen, Boggs, & Meyer 2015; REDODEM 2017).

Scholars Alba and Castillo similarly noted that the emphasis on both human rights and security “can appear contradictory and doubtlessly require[s] the agencies mandated with its implementation to enjoy a degree of discretion as they prioritize certain objectives over others” (Alba and Castillo 2012, 15). The overlap of immigration regulation and security is evidenced in the 2005 declaration that the INM was, in fact, a security entity, a decision no doubt tied to the signing of the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SSP) by Canada, the U.S. and Mexico that year (Wolf 2013, 18; Guevara Moyano 2016, 43). The Partnership, or *Alianza*, as its named in Spanish, “sought to create intelligent and secure borders, promote common economic development and align security agendas for North America” (2016, 43). In light of this security agreement (and others signed in later years), we might understand the centralization and standardization of migration status processing through an online platform as an attempt to make information from various database registries nationally accessible, and, if need be, internationally shareable through agreements like the SSP and GANSEF.

In summary, as argued in the case of *Programa Frontera Sur*, in the 2011 Migration Law multiple narratives are present. The more publicized narrative frames the law as an example of protection of human rights, in contradistinction to the model put forward in U.S. laws. However, there is evidence of other narratives at play in Mexico’s migration discourse, providing grounds to question how other objectives -- such as security and sovereignty -- intersect with the goal of protecting migrants’ rights. Below,

in the final section of this chapter, I explore how narratives of border security and migration intersect in the physical border infrastructure in southern Mexico, more clearly manifesting some of the contradictions traced in the previous areas of analysis.

THIRD ARENA OF ANALYSIS: BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

In the final section of this chapter, I investigate how the material and the discursive are “mutually articulated” in the construction, arrangement and operation of border infrastructure in southern Mexico (Barad 2009). The narrative of humanitarian concern, upheld in the two previous areas of analysis, is less apparent in the built environment of the border region, even though the complementary objectives of security and development are more immediately visible. Importantly, this focus on securitization more strongly links Mexico’s approach to border enforcement with that of the U.S., in opposition to the projected narratives of the previous sections, which work to distance the countries’ approaches to migration.

While there are no visible walls or fences at the southern border of Mexico, a point driven home by Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong in his May 2015 press conference, there is an intricate and expansive landscape of border infrastructure that extends well beyond the territorial nation-state line. In March 2014, before *Programa Frontera Sur* was officially initiated, Mexico’s National Security Council (CNS) announced a plan to increase border enforcement by installing three “belts of control” in the southern region of the country (Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar 2015). The first belt begins 30 miles from the Guatemalan border “in the zone of Huixtla, Suchiate, Arriaga, Trinitaria,

Comitán, Benemérito de las Américas, [and] Palenque” (Isacson, Meyer and Morales 2014). The second belt stretches from Arriaga, across Chiapas to the Gulf Coast of Tabasco; the final belt crosses the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrowest section of Mexico, in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz (see Fig. 1 below).

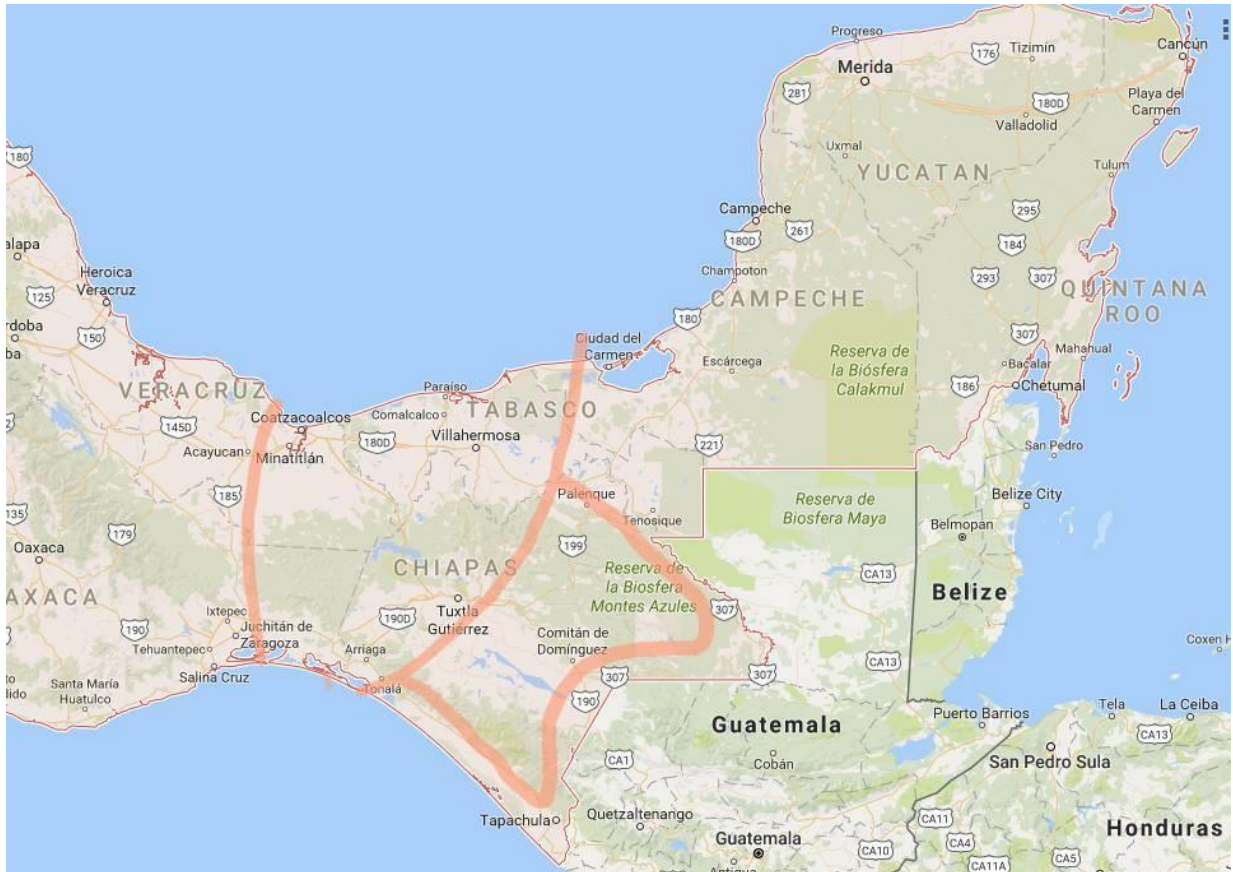


Figure 1. Belts of Control in Southern Mexico (from Google Maps, edited by author).

The types of infrastructure that form part of the border landscape vary significantly in size, visibility, and stated purpose. According to reports by the Washington Office on Latin America, structures include:

1. Official Border Crossings on the borderline with Guatemala and Belize, managed by the SAT (Servicio de Administración Tributaria), the INM, and various other agencies.
2. Naval bases near the borderline and also in the interior of Chiapas, managed by SEMAR (Secretaría de Marina).
3. Comprehensive Centers for Attention to Border Transit (*Centros de Atención Integral al Tránsito Fronterizo*) (CAITFs or super-checkpoints) located 30 to 50 miles from the borderline with Guatemala, along main highways. These super-checkpoints house up to eight federal agencies and are jointly managed (see section on *Comprehensive Centers for Attention to Border Transit* for more).
4. Army bases within the interior of Chiapas managed by SEDENA (Secretaría de Defensa Nacional).
5. Federal Police Headquarters in Tapachula and Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, managed by the Federal Police, overseen by CNS (Comisión Nacional de Seguridad).
6. Large-scale detention centers in Tapachula, Chiapas and Acayucan, Veracruz managed by the INM (Instituto Nacional de Migración).

An interactive map generated by WOLA details the locations of the aforementioned border infrastructure (WOLA February 2016).¹³ Not featured on this map are the fixed and mobile checkpoints managed by SEDENA, the Federal Police and the INM. Reports indicate that checkpoints are concentrated on the federal highways, including the Coastal Highway leading from Guatemala along the Pacific Coast of Chiapas into Oaxaca and throughout the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Although migrants must navigate all the aforementioned infrastructure in crossing through southern Mexico, certain infrastructure types (such as those managed by the INM) are explicitly intended for migration regulation, while others (such as the SEDENA and SEMAR bases and checkpoints) purport to address other “security” issues, such as combatting organized crime. While there have been reports that the latter checkpoint systems have impeded migrant mobility, in this chapter, I focus my analysis on infrastructure explicitly intended for migration regulation, which excludes SEDENA and SEMAR checkpoints and bases.

Also missing from WOLA’s map are the 200 INM offices located around the country, including at ports of entry and airports.¹⁴ Nearly one third of these offices are located in the southern border region. While the airport locations are only used to revise documents of people entering the country, at other INM offices migrants can submit paperwork to change their migratory status. The Global Detention Project notes that the

¹³ The map might be retrieved at https://www.wola.org/maps/1602_border/full-screen.html .

¹⁴ See <http://www.inm.gob.mx/gobmx/word/index.php/horarios-y-oficinas/> .

2011 Law of Migration allows for some of these offices to also temporarily serve as provisional detention centers (Global Detention Project 2013).

Centers for Comprehensive Attention to Border Transit (CAITFs)

As the sites of both the June 2014 and May 2015 press conferences concerning *Programa Frontera Sur*, the CAITFs have had the greatest amount of visibility of the border structures. Although euphemistically described as “bridges” between nations, these Centers serve as headquarters for securitization of the region. They were originally part of the SAT’s (Mexico’s customs agency) plan for enhanced monitoring of goods crossing into Mexico, but transformed into sites of inter-agency coordination. The Centers house up to eight agencies, which pertain to: the *Secretaría de Gobernación* (SEGOB, the Secretary of the Interior); the *Secretaría de Defensa Nacional* (SEDENA, the Army); the *Secretaría de Marina* (SEMAR, the Navy); the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SCHP, the Secretary of Finance); the *Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación* (SAGARPA, the Secretary of Agriculture); and the *Secretaría de Salud* (SS, the Secretary of Health) (SEGOB, *Decreto*, 2014). Under the Secretary of the Interior, the Federal Police, INM and *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR, the Attorney General of Mexico) also jointly operate there.

These centers are massive compounds. The Instituto Nacional de Administración y Avalúos de Bienes Nacionales (INDAABIN) (Administration and Appraisal of National Real Estate Institute) lists the areas of these complexes as ranging from 80,00.95

sq. meters to 267,823.92 sq meters.¹⁵ Because they contain two or more federal agencies and share common space and maintenance costs, the complexes are maintained by INDAABIN.¹⁶ However, the protocols for coordinating the various agencies are jointly determined by a Coordination Group led by SEDENA, the Army (PGR 2016).

The decision to expand the Centers to include multiple agencies aligns with the agenda set in the *Programa para la Seguridad Nacional 2014-2018* (National Security Program 2014-2018) -- that is, to increase the “presence of the State in the [southern border] area and to coordinate plans with Central American countries,” thereby establishing a modern, efficient, prosperous, and secure border (SEGOB, *Acuerdo*, 2014). Although the Centers are purported to fulfill the government’s interest in protecting migrants’ rights, they seem to be mostly focused on establishing “order” through security, as evidenced by their leadership (SEDENA, the Army). PGR, the agency in charge of investigating crimes committed against migrants, was only integrated into the CAITF system nearly two years after their establishment by Enrique Peña Nieto in June 2014, appearing more as an afterthought than an integral part of the border security plan (PGR 2016).

Detention Centers

Under the 2011 Migration Law, there are two main types of administrative detention infrastructures: a) “provisional” facilities, which are meant for short- to

¹⁵ http://www.indaabin.gob.mx/Paginas/Mapa_Dinamico.aspx.

¹⁶ https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/89595/7_y_8_DAOMI_-_Presentaci_n_Responsables_Inmobiliarios.pdf.

medium- term detention, and b) long-term detention facilities, “which are euphemistically called ‘migratory stations’ ” rather than detention centers (Global Detention Project 2013). The regulations of the 2011 law establishes “two types of estancias provisionales: ‘category A’ facilities, which are limited to 48-hour detention periods; and ‘category B’ facilities, which can be used for confinement periods of up to seven days” (ibid.). As mentioned previously, certain INM checkpoints also serve as provisional detention facilities, although it is unknown if they fall into “category A” or “B.” Migrants who are apprehended by the INM are usually housed at the provisional facilities until they can be transferred to the long-term detention centers. Some sources report that because long-term detention facilities are often at capacity, migrants are moved back and forth between provisional detention centers, thereby bypassing detention regulation.

According to information compiled by the Global Detention Project, “as of 2012, Mexico operated 35 long-term facilities and 23 provisional facilities,” although it is likely that the actual number is much higher (Global Detention Project 2013). Researchers noted that the number of detention centers has more than doubled since 2000, “when the INM reported having just 22 detention centers” (Diaz and Kuhner 2008).

In 2006, the largest detention center in Mexico, referred to as the 21st Century Migration Station, was opened in Tapachula, Chiapas, with a capacity of up to 960 people at a time (Diaz and Kuhner 2008). Other large detention centers are located in Acayucán, Veracruz (with a capacity of 836), Iztapalapa, Mexico City (with a capacity of 430), Tijuana and Tenosique (both with a capacity of 100) (Global Detention Project 2013).

Although politicians have described these detention centers as respectful of human rights, several civil society organizations have raised concerns regarding migrants' treatment in these spaces. The 2013 Insyde report observed that despite the fact that the INM has worked to improve the physical conditions of the centers, they continue to have a prison-like quality, in part due to how they are run, in part due to the boredom and uncertainty that arises from such confinement (Wolf 2013, 36). In a similar vein, the Center for Human Rights Fray Matías de Córdova found that the 21st Century Migration Station in Tapachula lacked adequate space for human rights defenders to consult with detainees and provide necessary information to ensure their rights were protected (CDH Fray Matías 2013, 16). Both organizations connect this management of detention centers to securitizing of the INM. According to their investigations, the decision to make this institution a national security entity has resulted in the primacy of national security over individual, human security.

The emphasis on national security is also evident in the coordination with the United States in the oversight of these facilities. In an interview, an INM agent admitted to seeing U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers “ ‘work regularly inside [the] migrant detention center near the border known as Siglo 21’ ” (Matalon 2016). According to this agent, “the U.S. [has been] helping to collect data on migrants and migrant flows through improved fingerprinting techniques, among other initiatives” (Matalon 2016). After Matalon’s article was published, the CBP contacted the Fronteras Desk, issuing the following statement:

DHS and INM share information and collaborate on a wide range of bilateral and regional immigration and border protection issues. As part of the Merida Initiative, and in conjunction with the Department of State [of the U.S.], CBP supports Mexican customs and immigration counterparts with a variety of technical assistance and capacity building programs aimed at both enhancing security and facilitating legitimate travel and trade (Matalon 2016).

In this statement, the DHS betrays a level of coordination between the U.S. and Mexico that the latter country has largely downplayed in its border discourse.

INM Checkpoints

In the interior of the country, numerous INM-run checkpoints (fixed and mobile) operate to detain undocumented migrants moving along main highways. Some of these fixed checkpoints have been in place for over a decade, but were recently updated under *Programa Frontera Sur*. Documents from the Department of Homeland Security indicate that the U.S. has shared an interest in fortifying and increasing the operation of checkpoints in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (the third belt of control) specifically. A 2014 briefing document for a telephone call between the U.S. DHS and the Mexican Ambassador to the United States indicates that “establishing checkpoint and mobile team operations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec,” along with increased collection and sharing of biometric data, aligned with U.S. priorities of “addressing migrant flows from Central America” (DHS 2014).

The Global Detention Project, which observed these facilities in 2012, recorded that the checkpoints also serve as provisional detention centers intended for short to medium term holding of undocumented migrants (Global Detention Project 2013).

Certain INM checkpoints include medical facilities and separate dorms for women and men (Fernández). The checkpoint in San Pedro de Tapanatepec, in the Isthmus, has a holding capacity of 30 people, while that in La Ventosa can hold up to 60 people at a time. Some checkpoints also include air conditioning and TV, which might be features in the INM's efforts to "humanize" migration control.

In addition to updating pre-existing fixed checkpoints, the Mexican government has also increased its use of mobile checkpoints (*volantas*), which move along federal highways, changing location frequently so as to take migrants unawares. Journalists have reported their operation in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, between the towns of Reforma and Chahuities as well as between Unión Hidalgo and Juchitán, Oaxaca. There is little information as to what these mobile checkpoints consist of, but journalists' accounts suggest they may involve impromptu roadblocks using INM vans or other vehicles, managed jointly by the INM and the Federal Police. It is likely that mobile non-intrusive inspection equipment, donated by the U.S. government to Mexican security forces, are also used at some of the checkpoints throughout the country (Ureste 2014).

CONCLUSION

The unspoken border narrative, visible in the construction and management of immigration infrastructure in southern Mexico, emphasizes security, achieved in part through U.S. collaboration (via funding, training, and shared technology used in these facilities). This security focus is apparent in the statistical rise of migrant detention in Mexico the year following the announcement of *Programa Frontera Sur*. Analyzing data

supplied by the INM and the CBP, the Washington Office on Latin America found that between October 2014 and April 2015, the Mexican immigration agency had detained more Central American migrants than the U.S. border patrol (WOLA 2015); they also observed an increase in human rights violations perpetrated by INM agents against migrants, as documented by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH) (Meyer 2016). The increase in INM activity, both at mobile and fixed checkpoints along highways, as well as more rigorous monitoring and intentionally increased speed of the train (*la Bestia*), has forced migrants to take more dangerous paths north (Meyer 2016). Rather than safeguarding migrants' rights, *Programa Frontera Sur* has put migrants in greater danger than in previous years.

This narrative diverges from the border discourse put forward in Mexico's 2011 Migration Law as well as in politicians' statements concerning *Programa Frontera Sur*. In the aforementioned discursive arenas of analysis, border enforcement and immigration regulation is framed in humanitarian terms; migrants' rights and unity among Mesoamerican countries is central to their narrative. Additionally, they work to distance Mexican approaches to border enforcement from those of the U.S.: the absence of a fence at the southern border of Mexico functions to symbolically separate U.S. and Mexican border policies and practices. They serve as theatrical performances of sovereignty, projecting an image of order and control over the territory in relation to the traffic of goods and people, as well in distinction from its northern neighbor.

However, as argued in the final section in this chapter, it is evident that what has materialized in the southern border region differs significantly from the idealized,

“model” approach to immigration regulation that Mexican politicians have proposed. Migrants’ rights have not been the focus of the build-up of border infrastructure, and there is evidence of direct U.S. participation in immigration control in the region. The mixed messaging resulting from these conflicting policy agendas -- solidarity with Central American migrants, on the one hand, and partnership with the U.S. in stemming migrant flows, on the other -- has helped to generate a landscape of uncertainty for migrants moving through the region. Even as access to legal protections are slowly made available to migrants (i.e. the eventual establishment of the Unit for Investigation of Crimes Against Migrants, under the PGR, and the modest expansion of COMAR, the agency responsible for processing asylum claims), they continue to be detained and deported at increasing rates (Suárez Enriquez, Knippen, and Meyer 2016).

Chapter III: Migration Narratives in the Margins

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I shift sites of analysis from the “center” of geopolitical discourse to the margins, where border-making is experienced in embodied and material forms. This movement follows both feminist geopolitical geographers’ attention to embodied knowledge and experience of geopolitics in the everyday, and Latour’s theorization of horizontal connections between scales rather than their nested containment, one within the other: the stories encountered at the periphery of the state partake in the material-discursive construction of the southern border in Mexico. To better understand the perspective of border-making from the margins, I switch tools of analysis from critical discourse analysis to ethnography, focusing on the material effects, events and obstacles encountered in navigating the territorial and administrative boundaries of the state.

Research Site

I chose to conduct my research in Oaxaca, rather than in a state located on the borderline of Mexico, because of its position beyond the three belts of control implemented under *Programa Frontera Sur*. In doing so, I was able to speak with migrants who had already navigated through the labyrinth of border infrastructure and enforcement personnel placed throughout the southern border region, and could more adequately assess the impacts of the recent immigration enforcement policies. Shelter workers identified Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca as one of the last stops for migrants traveling to Mexico City along the Pacific route north. Although the INM is active

throughout the country, some migrant advocates indicated that their presence is strongest in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which represents the shortest distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean -- a site where, despite the increased presence of law enforcement, many crimes against migrants are reported to occur (Chaca 2015).

The *albergue* where I volunteered and conducted research is part of a larger network of non-governmental organizations that provide humanitarian services to migrants and stay in communication concerning trends occurring along migration routes. Some migrants stayed at other *albergues* in Chiapas and in the Isthmus before arriving at Oaxaca de Juárez. Many of them had spent time at an *albergue* in Ixtepec,¹⁷ renowned for its politically outspoken founder, Padre Solalinde. This *albergue*, located along the train route of *La Bestia*, was reported to be hosting hundreds of people at once the summer of 2016.

While most migrants chose to follow the train north from Ixtepec to Veracruz, others traveled by bus, car or even walked to Oaxaca de Juárez instead. They might have taken this route for various reasons: to earn money in the relatively large state capital before moving further north; to file paperwork at the local INM office, or perhaps to find safety along a less traveled route. As it was explained to me by shelter workers and advocates, more common routes bypass the capital city, traveling either north through the

¹⁷ Ixtepec is a town located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, located a short distance from the infamous train that carries many migrants north on their journey to the United States.

Isthmus of Tehuantepec to Veracruz or keeping along the Gulf Coast, passing through Chiapas, Tabasco and then to Veracruz.¹⁸

The shelter where I conducted my research receives most of its funding from private donations rather than government assistance. Although the *albergue* is under the direction of a Catholic priest, it does not receive funding directly from the Catholic Church. This allows it to function somewhat independently, with some flexibility in how it is run, who it hosts, and how long guests can stay. Despite this flexibility, due to lack of space and resources migrants are usually encouraged to leave the *albergue* after three days. Exceptions are made if someone is ill, or if they are processing visa or asylum claims with the local INM office. While the shelter most commonly hosts migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, people emigrating from Mexico are also welcome to stay there.

During my summer fieldwork, from early June to early August 2016, the number of migrants staying at the shelter waxed and waned considerably. Some days the shelter was nearly empty; other days it was at capacity. I was told that the largest number of people staying at the shelter at once was 33. Normally, there were about 7 to 15 people staying at the shelter at a time.

Shelter staff included four people: two women who worked in the shelter's office, another woman who ran the kitchen, and one man, from El Salvador, who acted as a groundskeeper and lived on site. The three women, all from Oaxaca, stayed at the shelter

¹⁸ For more, see WOLA's report *Mexico's Other Border: Security, Migration, and the Humanitarian Crisis at the Line with Central America* (Isacson, A., et. al., 2014).

until around 2 pm each day. The director of the shelter (*el Padre*, as everyone called him), had founded the shelter in 2003. As a parish priest, the *albergue* director attended to many other issues outside the shelter every day, and spent considerable time facilitating events at his parish to raise awareness and support for the shelter.

Aside from the shelter staff, there were several volunteers who visited regularly. A young man, about my age, from Oaxaca, worked daily at the shelter as part of his social work degree. Two women from the United States volunteered on a weekly or biweekly basis, working on separate projects remotely. During my time there, I heard about other volunteers from elsewhere in Mexico and the U.S who had volunteered at the shelter for a few months at a time.

As mentioned in the Introduction, groups from U.S. universities, churches or human rights education programs visited the shelter throughout the summer. During these visits, shelter staff would give presentations on the state of migration through Mexico under *Programa Frontera Sur*. Migrants were sometimes invited to share their stories, including their reasons for leaving their home countries and their experiences en route.

Research Methods

In alignment with feminist geopolitical researchers' grounded approach to studying the state, I conducted my investigation primarily as a participant observer at the shelter. As Bernard (2006) has argued, the immersive quality of participant observation produces rapport, which gives researchers access to otherwise private or less visible activities as well as "experiential knowledge that lets you talk convincingly, from the gut,

about what it feels like to plant a garden in the high Andes or dance all night in a street rave in Seattle” (Bernard 2006, 342). I would add that it also serves as the basis for collaboratively producing knowledge through “partial connections” (de la Cadena 2015). De la Cadena writes that “partial connections enable the analysis of how [“this” and “that”] appear within each other and at the same time remain distinct” (2015, 33). As an outsider to the migration experience, my understanding of shelter dynamics and migration through Mexico is certainly distinct from that of my informants. However, by participating in the same practices and routines as others working and staying at the shelter, I became invested in goals of the organization, and absorbed some of its rhythms and language. The connections I formed with others -- although imperfect and partial -- provided a foundation for collaboratively producing knowledge surrounding migration under *Programa Frontera Sur*.

There are a number of ethical questions involved in conducting participant observation research, not least of which is deciding what information to include and what to omit in research results. Before beginning my fieldwork, I had received UT IRB approval to carry out this project, and had also obtained permission from the Padre to conduct participant observation research at the shelter as a volunteer. However, he had explicitly asked me not to use any specific, personal information about the guests at the shelter in order to protect them from subsequent identification. Prior to this conversation, I had not planned to use names or other identifying information in my thesis, but his request made me highly cognizant of the need to transmit stories with care, recording only information that was relevant to my topic of study, migration through the margins of

the state. Based on my conversation with the shelter director and my positionality as a student researcher and outsider to the migration experience, I decided not to include migrants' life histories in this research even though many people at the shelter openly shared their personal narratives in public settings. Instead, I have chosen to focus on migrants' experiences navigating the administrative and infrastructural borders of the state in Mexico, leaving out more personal aspects of migrants' journeys or life trajectories so as to keep their identities anonymous. By focusing on routines and repeated narratives among migrants, this research highlights general trends in migration through southern Mexico in the summer of 2016, rather than personal stories.

My schedule at the shelter varied, but I would normally spend mornings until early afternoons there, while the shelter office was open. I visited the shelter three to four days a week, changing my schedule depending on the number of people staying there and special events planned for that week. Immediately after visiting the shelter, I would write my fieldnotes for several hours.

On days when I was not at the shelter, I conducted participant observation elsewhere in Oaxaca City, taking in the landscape of securitization (and resistance to securitization) by attending open discussions, rallies or other public events held around the city. Although most of these forums or political events did not focus on migration specifically, I noticed that there were potential opportunities for alliance between local and transient populations.

My research also included several semi-structured interviews with migrant advocates from various organizations, as well as with a few migrants I met at the shelter.

When interviewing advocates, we would meet at a neutral location or in their offices. Questions focused on the impact of *Programa Frontera Sur* on migration, their perspective on U.S. involvement in the implementation of *Programa Frontera Sur*, challenges that migrants and advocacy organizations currently face, and the role of advocacy organizations in helping migrants navigate the state bureaucracy.

In the case of migrants, interviews were more difficult to arrange, and were conducted *in-situ* -- that is, in the *albergue* where we had met. There was little private space at the *albergue*, which made interviewing with migrants difficult. Because the circumstances for conducting interviews were less than ideal at the *albergue* and privacy was difficult to maintain, questions did not focus on life histories, traumatic narratives or issues of violence. Instead, questions focused on the specifics of navigating the infrastructural and administrative borders of the state: namely, the means of traveling through securitized or surveillanced territory, and the process of filing *Regularización Humanitaria* requests with the INM. Furthermore, most migrants passed through the *albergue* quickly, providing little time to build rapport and to allow us to both feel comfortable enough to conduct an interview. For the few interviews I did conduct, I chose to approach people who stayed at the shelter longer than average, whom I had gotten to know through everyday activities and casual conversation in the days prior. In retrospect, I would attribute my reticence to approach migrant informants for interviews in part to my nervousness and inexperience as a student researcher. If future research were to be conducted, I would certainly obtain more interviews -- and have them recorded and transcribed -- to solidify my findings.

This chapter theorizes *albergues* and migration routes as margins of the state, where conditions of exceptionality are experienced spatially and temporally. It also explores how *albergues* in particular serve as liminal thresholds to accessing the protections afforded migrants in Mexico: through advocate mediation, migrants become visible to the state, and the state becomes legible to migrants. The relationships cultivated by shelter staff and migration advocates with state officials are crucial to this process, demonstrating how the state is not simply an abstract institutional power, but is also embodied, made up of individuals whose attitudes towards migrants might change through their contact with advocates. At the same time, on the periphery of these institutions, the state is still often experienced by migrants as illegible, opaque and “illogical.” In this landscape of uncertainty, migrants are perpetually relegated to the margins, even as they navigate formal routes to state inclusion.

ALBERGUES AS MARGINS

Following the work of Das and Poole (2004), as well as Mountz (2010, 2011), this thesis contends that the margins of the state - zones of exception, fragmented protection and paradoxical inclusion and exclusion - extend beyond territorial borders and are apparent in everyday encounters between migrants, migrant advocates and the state. These zones of precarity shift along migration routes through southern Mexico, where the state has worked to increase border enforcement and impede Central American migration north, even as it professes to offer certain protections to migrants. These conflicting messages are apparent not only in the border discourse and infrastructure

under *Programa Frontera Sur*, discussed in the previous chapter, but also in everyday interactions with the state.

As spaces of permitted clandestinity, *albergues* serve as thresholds to state inclusion. They exhibit the overlap of formal and informal cartographies: on the one hand, they serve as conduits of knowledge, making the state legible to migrants and making migrants visible to the state; on the other hand, they also serve as places for developing alternative navigation through migrants' continued *invisibility* and clandestine mobility (explored in the following chapter). Migrant shelters exist at the juncture of official and unofficial cartographies, between permitted and clandestine movement as well as protection and exclusion.

Spaces of Legibility and Visibility

During my eight weeks at the shelter, I learned that one of the primary tasks of staff was to give orientation to migrants regarding their rights as undocumented persons moving through Mexican territory. In recent years, this came to include orientation in how to file of crime reports with the *Fiscalía de Atención al Migrante* (referred to as the *fiscalía* throughout this thesis), the state agency in charge of investigating crimes against migrants in Oaxaca, as well as filing paperwork to obtain *Regularización por razones humanitarias* (Regularization of Status for Humanitarian Reasons, called *Regularización Humanitaria* throughout this thesis) with the INM.¹⁹

¹⁹ There are many benefits to receiving *Regularización Humanitaria*. While the purpose of this temporary visitor status is to permit migrants to legally stay in Mexico while crimes committed against them are fully investigated, many migrants applied for this status for its additional benefits (legal work permit for one

According to one staff worker, some people who are making the journey north for the second or third time are already somewhat familiar with different authorities' roles in enforcing immigration laws. Many people know which agencies are "safe" to approach for help (in theory, Grupo Beta, for instance), and which to avoid; some have openly challenged authorities attempting to extort them, citing their rights under the new Migration Law. However, those who were making the journey for the first time sometimes do not know the rights and resources available to them legally, making them less likely to report crimes committed against them. At the shelter, after conducting an initial interview with new guests, the office staff would provide such information to migrants in hopes of making their passage through Mexico safer.

One of my informants who worked at the local Guatemalan consulate confirmed the vital role that third-party actors, such as shelter workers and advocates like himself, play in raising awareness of the resources offered by the state to migrants. He recounted that upon visiting *albergues* and detention centers in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, he was often approached by migrants of all nationalities who wanted to learn about their rights in the Mexican territory. Although he was an employee of the Guatemalan government and officially served his home country's citizens, he shared information freely with everyone who was interested because "no one else is doing this."

year, and ease of mobility throughout the country). The *Regularización Humanitaria* was often colloquially referred to as a "humanitarian visa" (*visa humanitaria*). However, officially speaking, the humanitarian visa refers to an entirely different type of migration application. For more, see <http://www.gob.mx/inm/acciones-y-programas/tramites-migratorios> on the distinction between the *regularización humanitaria* and the *visa humanitaria*.

However, due to the growing number of people passing through shelters in recent years, he noted that it is nearly impossible to reach everyone. The shelter he visited in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was reported to be housing upwards of 150 people at a time during the summer of 2016, and the shelter staff and volunteers could barely keep up with basic tasks such as cooking food and attending to medical issues, leaving little time to screen for rights violations or to provide “Know Your Rights” workshops.

Similarly, at the shelter where I volunteered, which housed far fewer migrants than the *albergues* of the Isthmus, it was difficult for the two office workers to speak with everyone who stayed at the shelter. One of the office staff said that if migrants do not approach her with specific questions, it is difficult to inform them of potential protections they might obtain. While shelters do strive to open doors to legal resources and protections that might enable migrants’ safe movement within the Mexican territory, they lack the funding and staffing to adequately do so. Their own marginal positioning within the state -- as under-resourced NGOs, reliant on donations and volunteer service -- limits their potential to increase migrants’ access to the rights afforded them.

Even though the *albergue* where I volunteered was limited in its capacity to give all migrants legal orientation as they continued on their journeys, to the extent that was possible it made otherwise difficult or obscured state administrative procedures legible to migrants. For instance, in recent years, one of the most time-consuming tasks for shelter workers included assistance in filing for *Regularización Humanitaria*. Under Article 52 of the 2011 Migration Law, migrants who are victims of or witnesses to grave crimes in Mexican territory can apply for temporary status for humanitarian reasons (Knippen et al.

2015, 44). The regularized temporary visitor status gives migrants legal standing to remain in Mexico for one year, with a work permit while the investigation of the crime is underway, and it can be renewed if necessary.²⁰ Many migrants choose to obtain this type of visitor status in order to legally earn money in Mexico before continuing their journeys north, and to more quickly and safely travel north to the United States (with the protection of the temporary visitor status, they would not have to avoid INM checkpoints).

Drawing on statistics from the INM, the Washington Office on Latin America noted that in 2013, only 277 “*Tarjetas de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias*” had been issued in Mexico (Knippen et al. 2015, 45). However, by 2015, the number of *tarjetas* requested had quintupled, rising to 1,481 for the first half of 2016 (January-June) (Knippen et al. 2015, 45). The increase in the issuance of this migration status might be attributed in large part to the support provided by *albergues* and other migration advocate organizations (Knippen et al. 2015, 44).

Migrant advocates and shelter staff confirmed this was the case. One staff worker characterized the process to obtain the *tarjeta* as long and “illogical.” Because the forms are filled out and submitted online, migrants must have access to a computer to complete the process. Information is uploaded to an online form that is processed by the INM, and notifications on the status of the *tarjeta* are sent to the applicant through the online

²⁰ In SEGOB’s *Lineamientos para trámites y procedimientos migratorios*, it is mentioned in vague terms that once the visitor status for humanitarian reasons has been granted, legal status in the country might be altered (presumably to become a permanent resident) (SEGOB August 8, 2012). However, during my fieldwork I had not heard of anyone pursuing this route to permanent residency in the country.

system. For someone who does not have easy web access, this process would be very difficult, if not impossible.

Furthermore, advocates and shelter staff stated that the currency of their personal relationships with INM officials, developed through repeatedly filing of the *tarjeta* requests, increased their ability to help secure this protected status for migrants. While they attempted to help nearly all migrants with credible claims, shelter staff told me that they pre-screen potential applicants to make sure that their claims are legitimate, verifying their stories with a database shared by the other shelters. My informant at the Consulate of Guatemala said that the *Regularización Humanitaria* system is sometimes abused; on more than one occasion he has been asked to corroborate bogus claims (which he refuses to do). Thus, in order to protect the legitimacy of substantial claims, advocates are sometimes selective in which cases they choose to mediate (although they try to assist the majority of migrants filing *tarjeta* requests). By developing relationships of trust with INM office staff, they improve the likelihood of procuring the *tarjeta humanitaria* on behalf of applicants. Because of their knowledge of how to maneuver through the online system *and* their personal relationships with individual officers of the INM, shelter staff play a crucial role in facilitating access to the legal protections afforded through the temporary visitor status.

As places where migrants can receive orientation regarding their rights and potential avenues to increased mobility in the country, *albergues* might be seen as spaces of connection and opening into “official” state integration. Shelter workers and other advocates are relied upon to facilitate this process, making confusing or technical state

practices legible to migrants who might not otherwise be aware of their options. At the same time, they legitimate migrants' claims before the state, facilitating their visibility in ways that are more likely to receive desired results. As Poole observed in the case of the margins of the state in the rural Andes, the " 'letter of the law' is rendered curiously illegible, or opaque through the very processes and procedures that produces the documents that are its material expression" (Poole 2004, 62).

The relevance of personal relationships between migrant advocates and the INM staff also points to the state's embodiment in individuals, supporting Mountz's argument that the state "emerges as a rather haphazard constellation of actors" -- with personal affinities and biases -- rather than just as a "monolithic" institution with a "coherent, hidden strategy" of exclusion (Mountz 2010, 88-89, 118). Everyday interactions between migration advocates and officials alter the officers' attitudes towards migrants, in some cases improving the odds of issuance of the *tarjeta humanitaria*. One advocate commented that over the years, he has seen INM officials' attitudes change: they have heard the stories, seen the *golpes* (wounds), visited the hospitals, and thus now have a better understanding that the threats against migrants are very real. Because of the trust established with government staff, advocates are able to leverage their relationships with the INM agents and *fiscalía* so that they follow through with the investigation of migrants' claims.

However, despite the shelter workers' attempts to illuminate the otherwise opaque procedure of obtaining a *tarjeta humanitaria*, the path is still very uncertain for migrants who must navigate these administrative borders. In the following section, I outline the

steps involved in achieving *Regularización Humanitaria*. I argue that while migrants must work to get their narratives “straight” -- that is, fit for presentation to the INM with all the appropriate forms and documents -- they also must travel through a winding and confusing process that, in many instances, discourages them from exercising the rights they are entitled to.

Mapping the Regularización Humanitaria Process

From what I observed in my two months of volunteering at the shelter, the steps to obtain the *tarjeta* were by no means clear or consistent. It took the duration of my fieldwork before I finally grasped what paperwork was necessary for presentation at which agency, in which town or city. Even after hearing the basic steps repeated by shelter staff multiple times, I remained confused why certain applicants seemed to have extra steps to complete, or why some people had to return south, retracing their steps to earlier points in their journey, in order to move through the *regularización* process.

What I pieced together through several conversations with shelter workers, migrant advocates and migrants was that there were two agencies involved, the state-level *fiscalía* (*Fiscalía de Atención al Migrante*), the agency where the crime report would first be filed, and the INM, which processes the request for the *tarjeta de visitante por razones humanitarias* (referred to throughout as the *tarjeta* or *tarjeta humanitaria*). After migrants experience or witness a grave assault (which, according to advocates, happens with frequency in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec), they must file a report with the local *fiscalía*. In Oaxaca, this agency has offices in Chahuities and Ixtepec, both located in

the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The crime report must be filed close to where the incident occurred (for instance, if the assault occurred near Chahuities, near the border of Oaxaca and Chiapas, complainants would have to file at the office there).

Most migrants with whom I spoke would then stay at the *albergue* in Ixtepec or Chahuities while carrying out the first steps in the investigative process, which included visiting the scene of the crime with someone from the *fiscalía* office.²¹ After the initial interview and revisiting of the assault site, the *fiscalía* would give the complainant a signed document confirming that the investigation of their case was underway. Furnished with this official document legitimizing their claim, migrants could then solicit the *tarjeta humanitaria* at an INM office to regularize their migration status.

Most people I spoke with would apply for the *Regularización Humanitaria* in either Salina Cruz, a port city located in the Isthmus, or in the capital, Oaxaca de Juárez. Before visiting the INM office, they would need to fill out and print an online form that included details of the assault, and also print a copy of their passport (as mentioned earlier, this was usually carried out with the assistance of shelter staff). Once they had completed the online form, they would wait to be notified of their in-person interview, the first of three required visits to the INM offices.

Upon the first visit to the INM office, applicants are supposed to bring: a printed copy and an original version of their passport or other official identifying document; an original document from a public institution that indicates the applicant had filed for an

²¹ Although legally speaking, migrants could report a crime at another *ministerio público* office, I was told that migrants were usually directed to carry this process out at the *Fiscalía de Atención al Migrante* since they specialized in investigating crimes against migrants.

investigation of a grave crime (usually from the *fiscalía*); and a printed copy of the online form to request the *Regularización Humanitaria*. At this interview, INM officials would determine if a small perfunctory fine would be imposed, ostensibly for the administrative infraction of crossing into Mexican territory without permission.²² After all the documents are received, applicants would be notified of their second appointment to take their photograph and record their fingerprints. Finally, once that information has been processed through a centralized database, applicants are notified a third time to visit the INM office to finally receive the *tarjeta*.

From the time of submitting the online form, migrants have 90 days to complete all the steps required in the *Regularización Humanitaria* process. During this time, they might try to secure any missing documents, such as a copy of the passport or other government issued identifying document. The migrant advocate at the Guatemalan consulate said this requirement created a significant hurdle to many applicants, many of whose documents might have been stolen or lost during the reported assault or earlier in their journey. To assist co-nationals in this situation, the consulate began issuing a substitute document -- a *constancia de origen* --, which includes the name, photograph and other identifying information of the applicant, as well as the seal of the Guatemalan government. Oftentimes the INM office would contact him to verify that these *constancia* documents were not false, again pointing to the pivotal role that third-party migrant advocates play in legitimizing migrants' claims.

²² See Articles 73 and 145 of the 2011 Migration Law for more.

Importantly, migrants make themselves visible to the state through the papers they fill out and carry. A lack of adequate documentation might result in detention if stopped at a checkpoint, or immobility in the administrative process of obtaining a *tarjeta humanitaria*. As Poole writes in her study on movement through checkpoints in the Peruvian Andes, the “lived geography of [the] state...-like the paperwork itself- is never fixed or stable” from the perspective of those in the margins (Poole 2004, 36). Required paperwork becomes the state’s means to maintain marginality, creating an “uncertain geography” that difficult to decipher without an intermediary, who often must serve as a bridge to state inclusion. Even with the guidance and resources of third party advocates, the administrative process to obtain protection via *Regularización Humanitaria* is lengthy and exhausting, and often requires further journeying through state margins -- both temporal and spatial -- to finally achieve some security under state jurisdiction.

Temporal Margins

As Mountz writes in the case of asylum-seekers, “temporality is often conceptualized as waiting, limbo or suspension. These temporal zones map onto corresponding spatial ambiguities theorized [here] as liminality, exception and threshold” (Mountz 2011, abstract). Similarly, Hyndman and Giles (2017) and Ehrkamp (2016) theorize that refugees waiting for asylum status experience an “ontological insecurity,” creating zones of exception tied to temporality. My fieldwork corroborates these scholars’ arguments: in the case of migration through southern Mexico, margins were

often experienced as spatial-temporal zones that had to be journeyed through at the applicant's' risk in order to be formally granted state protection.

Shelter workers whom I interviewed admitted that most requested *tarjetas* were eventually issued. However, the time to receive the *Regularización* of their migration status varied greatly -- from two weeks to two months -- for reasons that were unclear to many waiting through the process. This indefinite wait time, as well as continued movement in spaces of uncertainty and risk, perpetuated applicants' restriction to the margins and reinforced the partiality of their inclusion in state protection.²³

Advocates from a nearby shelter mentioned that one of the biggest changes they noticed in recent years was the time it was taking for migrants to move through the region. Before *Programa Frontera Sur*, migrants would stay at their shelter three to five days; now, many migrants would end up staying one month or more, in part to wait through the *Regularización Humanitaria* process. Another staff worker where I volunteered confirmed this was the case at their shelter: although many migrants did indeed receive the *tarjeta* if they requested it, many chose not to pursue that route to formal state inclusion because of the time it takes to collect the appropriate documents, obtain an appointment with the INM, and wait for the paperwork to process.

According to some migrants with whom I spoke, the process was not so much difficult as it was frustrating. One man from Guatemala mentioned that he had filed his paperwork over one month ago and was still waiting to receive his *tarjeta*; he had met

²³ As a result, many migrating people felt that it was not worth their time to pursue such a route, and instead carried on with their journeys through informal means (discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4).

others who filed their paperwork at the same time he had, but received their *tarjetas* within two weeks. It was frustrating to not know why this was the case, and the opacity of the administration of *tarjetas* was experienced as illogical and arbitrary.

Several people staying at the shelter mentioned that in addition to the time spent waiting for their paperwork to process, they also had to wait for that of their family members who might be held up at different points in the migration route. One woman told me that she had received her *tarjeta*, and was now only waiting for her son to receive his. Another long-term guest at the shelter had successfully petitioned for refugee status in Mexico -- a separate, reportedly more difficult and lengthy process than applying for *Regularización Humanitaria* -- but was now waiting for the state to extend this status to his wife and children, who were held up in the southern border city of Tapachula, Chiapas. Even after they were individually given formal state protection through the *Regularización Humanitaria* or the granting of refugee/asylum status, they had to mentally move through the process *again* on behalf of their family members, doubling the uncertainty experienced in navigating the administrative borders of the state.

To obtain the legal protections they were due after suffering violence in Mexican national territory, migrants were required to wait, indefinitely, in one place while their papers processed and interview was scheduled. But for some, slowing down the pace of movement came at a cost; in some instances, lost momentum allowed doubt or fear to interfere with previous plans. One woman said that after suffering an assault and then moving through the complicated journey to obtain the correct paperwork to request the *Regularización Humanitaria*, she'd had enough time to reconsider their plans to cross the

US-Mexico border. Maybe it would be even more difficult than this -- maybe it would be more dangerous than what they had already experienced? Perhaps these doubts would have surfaced even if she had continued her journey north without waiting through the *Regularización Humanitaria* process, but in the empty hours at the *albergue* with little to do, waiting for news about their *tarjetas*, she had ample time to oscillate between options.

Spatial Margins

The temporal margins experienced in waiting for the *Regularización Humanitaria* process to complete corresponds with the spatial margins of safety and danger, as well as legality and illegality, that characterize border-making in southern Mexico. Under certain circumstances, rest, refuge and increased mobility are afforded under the 2011 Migration Law. However, these protections are precarious; they are not easy or straightforward to obtain.

According to Article 76 of the 2011 Migration Law, INM agents who manage the border region checkpoints cannot ask to verify migration status in *albergues* or other civil society organizations offering humanitarian services to migrants -- in other words, INM agents cannot conduct immigration “raids” at *albergues*, where they know many undocumented migrants are staying. While there have been violations of this article by INM officials, the law has provided grounds for complaint by civil society organizations (“Mas de 60 organizaciones...” 2013).

However, what remains more ambiguous is the legality of INM agents to detain undocumented migrants just outside of or nearby the *albergues*. The *Padre* at the

albergue where I volunteered said he maintained a good relationship with the INM and informally established an agreement that they would not wait for migrants to exit the *albergue* to be “caught.” He has noted, however, that the INM might station nearby if there had been suspicion that someone had committed a crime in the city. In short, the *albergue*’s status as a space of refuge is negotiated and maintained through political clout and personal relationships between migrant advocates and INM officials, confirming the importance of advocates in ensuring respect of migrants’ rights. However, even with this leverage, it is still largely at the INM’s discretion how generously this “safe refuge” clause of the Migration Law is applied.

MOBILITY THROUGH THE MARGINS

For many migrants, applying for *Regularización Humanitaria* was a guarantee of legal protection against their detention by INM agents in Mexico, whether they decide to stay in the country or to continue migrating north. However, as explained earlier, the process of obtaining this protection is confusing and lengthy; in many instances, migrants were required to move in circles in order to secure legal status in the country. They often had to take on certain risks -- and costs -- in order to access the protections granted through *Regularización*.

It was often the case that upon arriving at the shelter where I volunteered, migrants who were qualified to receive the *tarjeta humanitaria* would have to retrace their steps, going back to the location where the crime had occurred, to report it to the local *fiscalía* and submit their paperwork to the nearest INM office. This backwards-

forwards journeying through the *Regularización* process was the cause of much stress for migrants and advocates alike during the period of my fieldwork. Migrants were receiving conflicting information about where to process their paperwork: many of them reported crimes committed against them at the *fiscalía*'s office in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, but were told to process their paperwork for the *Regularización Humanitaria* at the INM office in Oaxaca de Juárez because the office in Salina Cruz, in the Isthmus, was overburdened and could not process the quantity of requests arriving at once. This produced considerable confusion for the shelter staff where I was volunteering, as they were not prepared to host the number of migrants arriving from the Isthmus, most of whom needed to stay at the shelter until they received the *tarjeta*.

Upon arriving at our shelter, many of these applicants were told to go back to the Isthmus to complete their paperwork, as it was standard procedure to apply for the *tarjeta* at the office nearest the incident of assault. For some, the risks and costs of retracing their steps was a deterrent to pursuing the *Regularización Humanitaria* at all.²⁴ One shelter staff worker explained that upon learning that they would have to return to the place where the assault had occurred, many migrants chose not to continue with the application process, instead continuing north without the legal protections they were qualified to receive. My informant at the Consulate of Guatemala confirmed this and added that many

²⁴ Although it was not mentioned by any of migrant informants, other organizations and albergues have reported that INM agents and Mexican state and federal security forces are responsible for many of the crimes committed against migrants. In its evaluation of complaints received from 2010 to 2015, the CNDH (*Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*, National Human Rights Commission) found that from 2014 to 2015, following the implementation of *Programa Frontera Sur*, there was a 53% increase in complaints filed against INM agents, and a 36% increase in complaints filed against the Federal Police. In this same time period, complaints filed by migrants specifically increased by 31%. For more, see <http://informe.cndh.org.mx/menu.aspx?id=279>.

migrants, after receiving a case number from the INM (which would give them temporary permit to be in the country for up to 90 days to complete the *regularización*) would try to reach the U.S.-Mexico border within that time period without trying to secure the *tarjeta* and the full legal status and benefits afforded to them under the law. Others who had not begun the *Regularización Humanitaria* process but had denounced the crime at a local *fiscalía* might try to do the same, not realizing that their temporary permit lasted only 15 days. If stopped outside of that timeframe by INM officials, they could be subject to detention and deportation.

For some migrants, retracing their routes to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec meant they would have to pay for transportation that would otherwise be spent moving north, towards their ultimate destination. It also meant that they were at increased risk of suffering yet another assault or robbery -- even with a temporary permit to be in the country, they would have to travel back through places where crimes against migrants were fairly common, with impunity. Thus, the complicated process of obtaining the official state protections they were legally due became a labyrinthian journey, moving in and out of spaces of precarity and marginality.

Knowing that many migrants would not stay and wait through the investigative process, law enforcement often chose not to fully investigate the crimes reported. The staff worker at the Consulate of Guatemala stated that oftentimes the *fiscalía* assumed that because the victims of crimes in the Isthmus had already left the region, presumably continuing their journey north, there was little point in carrying out the investigation or convicting suspected perpetrators. My informant said that on more than one occasion, he

himself had asked for updates on cases, demanding to know what progress had been made in preventing these crimes from continuing. The initial response of the *fiscalía* was that these cases had been closed because the migrants had left the region. However, under his persistent pressure, two arrests were made (although he emphasized that these were only two arrests in two years).

INTERMITTENT AND OSCILLATING PRESENCE OF THE STATE IN THE MARGINS

This reluctance of state officials to fully ensure migrants' rights functions as intermittent contact of the state in the margins. On the one hand, the state is highly visible, with INM checkpoints set up throughout the Isthmus, as explained in the previous chapter. However, the fact that many crimes are committed against migrants with impunity, even when law enforcement is known to have a significant presence in the region, demonstrates how the state selectively serves as a resource for and protector of migrants. Although there are offices dedicated to combatting crimes against migrants (like the *fiscalía* office), it is at their discretion whether or not they complete the investigation of the crimes. Migrants anticipate this partial protection by the state, and many choose not to exercise their right to seeing their cases fully investigated because they do not believe it will result in any real change.

For instance, I had asked one woman if she felt safer traveling along the migration route with such a visible presence of security officials. She laughed, and responded that she wouldn't count on them providing protection unless she had money to pay them. Her skepticism was shared by many migrants I met at the shelter, as extortion by government

officials is commonplace throughout Mexico (“Continúan las extorsiones...” 2014; REDODEM 2014; REDODEM 2015; Vogt 2013). From the perspective of the margins, it seemed that the state’s purpose and presence oscillated between protection and exploitation. In another man’s account, branches of the INM, like Grupo Beta (intended to offer orientation, food and emergency resources to migrants traveling without documentation) might offer migrants food and aid in one moment, and then five minutes later notify other INM officers of the migrants’ location, so that they might be apprehended and deported.

These varied encounters with the state contribute to a shifting topography of the state of exception, creating a landscape of uncertainty for those granted access to only a partial inclusion. The uncertainty produced through these oscillating and intermittent forms of contact with the state contributed to migrants’ reluctance to exercise their rights to the fullest, and in some instances encouraged them to continue their journeys north invisibly, without official protections of the state.

As Das and Poole (2004) assert, from the perspective of the margins, the state administrative procedures appear as illegible or “illogical.” Even with the mediating assistance of third party advocates, migrants must indefinitely wait through lengthy processes, or travel backwards, through dangerous or costly routes, in order to eventually move ahead, towards inclusion in the legal folds of the state. The intermittent presence of the state -- sometimes as a protector, sometimes as a danger -- generates a landscape of confusion that makes mobility in the margins of the state all the more difficult.

Mountz might argue that this opacity and illegibility might also be experienced within the state's own bureaucracies. However, based on the perspective of those on the periphery of the state -- those who must navigate its territorial and administrative borders -- the state's seeming inability to consistently, effectively and "logically" facilitate the means for migrants to be incorporated into its protection betrays a certain apathy towards their plight, if not an intentional, systematic orientation to keep migrants perpetually in the margins.

In the situation of migrants applying for the *Regularización Humanitaria*, the unpredictable encounters with the state in the migration route function as "techniques of [its] power... [T]he exception operates as a potential (dis)ordering principle": as migrants travel back and forth between government offices, in varying states of legality and safety, the borders between the inside and outside of the state are blurred (Belcher et al. 2008). Furthermore, their movement through this uncertain landscape characterizes their journeys as precarious, as points of access to state inclusion open and close depending on what documents and signatures they carry. Because of this precarity, many migrants choose to continue their journeys without obtaining all the protections they are due under the law; they develop alternative cartographies to navigate the state, as explained further in the following chapter.

Chapter IV: Margins as Creative Spaces / The Production of Alternative Geographies in Oaxaca

INTRODUCTION

Although margins are often sites of illegibility, opacity and uncertainty for those who are not fully incorporated into the legal folds of the state, they are also creative spaces where “alternative forms of political actions are instituted” (Das and Poole 2004, 19). In the case of migration through Mexico under *Programa Frontera Sur*, migrants achieved this by maintaining invisibility and choosing to remain illegible to the state, while creating and sharing new clandestine cartographies for moving north.

Albergues are places where migrants can (somewhat) safely access the state, but they are also places where migrants can develop and share unofficial mappings of migration routes, exercising their own agency producing new social terrains (Rodríguez & Jonas 2014). Using invisibility as a tactic, many migrants choose to avoid the uncertain and lengthy processes of becoming visible to the state, and opt to continue moving north without the benefits of a temporary visitor status -- which many are qualified to receive -- in Mexico.

Additionally, this chapter looks at the ways that the relative marginality of the southern border region and of Oaxaca, in particular, overlaps with the marginality of the migration routes. Over the summer, I observed how tactics of resistance generated on a regional scale inadvertently created openings for migrants’ increased mobility along informal routes. By bringing attention to this overlap of margins, it might be possible to identify potential room for alliances that reach across distinct demographics and scales.

ALBERGUES AS PLACES OF INTERSECTION IN THE MARGINS

While the *albergue* where I conducted fieldwork functioned as a key access point to state incorporation, usually with the assistance of migrant advocates, it also served as a place of intersection between formal and informal cartographies. Many people who arrived at the shelter did not have a concrete plan as to how they would continue their trajectories north. We would often pass the time looking at one of the many maps of Mexico posted on the walls of the shelter, connecting cities and *albergues* between them on the way to the U.S.-Mexico border.

For instance, after giving a presentation on migrants' legal rights upon entering the U.S., one woman approached me to ask if I thought it would be safer to enter the U.S. through Laredo, TX, or closer to Tijuana. I was unprepared to give her an answer, not simply because I was completely ignorant of the actual process of border crossing, but also because I had assumed most people had already planned their trajectory through Mexico. In retrospect, it makes sense that in a constantly shifting landscape of mobile checkpoints, unpredictable encounters with law enforcement, and other numerous factors, plans would have to remain flexible, open to revision at a moment's notice. While these revisions sometimes included obtaining formal state protection through *Regularización Humanitaria*, they often involved skirting around formal passage points, or moving in and out of the state's line of sight.

Shelter workers told me that migrants usually conferred among themselves to share information on how to continue north. It was not uncommon for people to meet for

the first time at the shelter and then continue their journeys together, at least for portions of their routes. I spoke with one woman and daughter from El Salvador who ended up leaving the shelter with someone who they met there, migrating from Nicaragua. All three of them traveled from the *albergue* to Mexico City, where they worked and lived together, temporarily, to save money for the rest of their prospective travels to the U.S. Their plans were formed spontaneously, from a chance encounter en route.

It was also common to arrive at the shelter to find that the dozen or so people who were there the night before -- some of whom might be in the process of obtaining *the tarjeta humanitaria* -- had all decided to leave that morning. Shelter staff accepted these abrupt changes as routine, and acknowledged that they were not often informed of where and how people were choosing to continue their journeys. They assumed that information had been shared among those staying at the shelter, and perhaps it was an opportune moment to leave -- albeit along informal paths. Opting out of formal passage into the state via the *Regularización Humanitaria* process, and thereby opting out of being made visible and legible to the state, many migrants chose to continue moving north clandestinely, generating alternatives to state induction in order to maintain mobility.

OVERLAP OF MARGINS: OAXACA AS A MARGINAL SPACE

During the course of my fieldwork, I also observed how creativity in migration was enhanced through the overlap of marginal spaces. The CNTE teachers' protests, which had been ongoing since 2013, but culminated in violent clashes with the federal police on June 19, 2016, produced waves of reactions among residents of the region,

inadvertently creating openings to unofficial migration routes. In this section of the chapter, I explore the ways that the relative marginality of Oaxaca, exemplified in part through the state repression that occurred the summer of 2016, intersected with the geographies of migration in unexpected but generative ways. Namely, protestors' responses to neoliberal policies and state violence²⁵ -- enacted through the hyper-visibilization of their *own* marginal status -- enhanced migrants' *invisibility* as they slipped through protest blockades and around police checkpoints.

History of Oaxaca as Margins of the State

Oaxaca, and southern Mexico in general, has long been considered marginal in terms of its high poverty rates and racist, repressive treatment of its indigenous majority population (Gibler 2007; Hernández Castillo 2008; Ruiz Cervantes & Traffano 2006; Stephen 2002).²⁶ Oaxaca is often characterized as having a strong culture and history of resistance, in part due to its economic and ethnic marginalization and repressive treatment by the federal government (Rénique 2007; Rénique and Poole 2008).²⁷ Local

²⁵ For more on the rise of neoliberalism and authoritarian repression and state violence in Mexico, see Blanca Cordero Díaz's and Carlos Figueroa Ibarra's chapter "Triturando a la humanidad: capitalismo, violencia y migración en el tránsito por México" in *Migración, seguridad, violencia y derechos humanos*.

²⁶ Around 70% of the population in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas and Guerrero live in poverty, compared to the national average of 46.2% of the Mexican population (Aguillera 2016). According to a 2015 INEGI survey, 13.3% of Oaxaca's population above the age of 15 could not read or write, compared to the national average of 5.5% (INEGI 2015). Scholars have noted the correlation between the state's high indigenous population (around 32% of the population speaks an indigenous language, and around 65% self-identify as indigenous) and the high rates of poverty and inequality (INEGI 2015; Rénique and Poole 2008).

²⁷ It is often remembered in public discourse that Oaxaca successfully ousted three corrupt or unpopular governors (in 1947, 1952 and 1974) (Rénique 2007). Some indigenous communities had even successfully cut ties with the Oaxacan state government for certain periods of time in order to maintain local autonomy (Stephen 2002). Several movements for local autonomy and secession occurred in early to mid-19th century as well as in the early 20th century. In the 1970s, an opposition government was organized by a

indigenous organizing against land dispossession, the imposition of extractive industries or lack of consultation over land has persisted for decades (López Bárcenas 2013; Matias 2017).

The beginning of the teachers' movement in Oaxaca has been traced to 1980, when the local union, *Sección 22*, then of the SNTE (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación*, the National Union of Education Workers) was reformed, breaking with its prior PRI alliance to function more autonomously (Gibler 2007).²⁸ Many leaders of the Local 22 come from rural, indigenous communities in Oaxaca and participate in collective organizing on a range of progressive issues; teachers have often played a fundamental role in community politics in marginalized spaces of Oaxaca.

The teachers' movement gained widespread international attention in 2006, in what came to be called "The Oaxaca Uprising" (Gibler 2007). After failed negotiations with Governor Ruiz to increase rural teachers' wages and financial support for their students, members of *Sección 22* set up an encampment in Oaxaca's city center. In an effort to oust the encampment, police squads attacked the protesters without announcement. However, their plan backfired: "an estimated 300,000 people [-- many unaffiliated with the teachers' union --] took to the streets out of a sense of ... pride and indignation ... joining the teachers and calling for the governor's resignation, and the end

coalition of students, *campesinos*, workers and indigenous communities, concentrated in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Organized struggles for indigenous cultural recognition and autonomy have continued from the late-1960s to the present. For more, see Stephen 2002.

²⁸ Today, *Sección 22* pertains to the CNTE, the more radical faction of the national teachers' union that has led the resistance to neoliberal education reform.

to repression and corruption” (Favela 2010, 66).²⁹ The resistance was eventually broken by federal police in tanks, helicopters and bulldozers, and although some compromises were attained, “many of the issues that led to the rebellion remain[ed] unresolved” (Favela 2010, 68-69).

The Teachers’ Movement of 2016

Scholars Rénique and Poole argue that the teachers’ movement of 2016 is not a mere continuation of the 2006 popular uprising, but rather is the culmination of ongoing marginalization, neglect and growing resentment toward the federal government (Rénique and Poole 2016). In 2013, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration adopted an education reform bill that would create standardized teaching evaluations, reducing the power of the *normals* -- the local teacher schools that serve young, *campesino* teachers and tend to foster more leftist politics (Asmann 2016) –, effectively shifting power away from the teachers’ union to the federal government.³⁰ The reform, which opens public education in Mexico to private investment, was developed along with a series of privatization measures that impacted the energy and health sectors, expanded

²⁹ Days later, this coalition of protesters formed the APPO -- the Oaxaca People’s Popular Assembly -- initially convoked by the teachers’ union, but eventually incorporating hundreds of organizations and previously unaffiliated individuals into a massive grassroots movement (Gibler 2007). The Assembly was able to eventually “take control of the city, force the governor out of the palace, and blockade the streets to prevent police from entering the center” (Favela 2010, 67). Despite the popular outcry against the governor, the state government refused to allow his removal, and instead responded by organizing paramilitary and police attacks on protesters, killing an estimated 13 people from August to November 2006 (Gibler 2007).

³⁰ Rénique and Poole write that the education reform stemmed from a 2008 agreement between Mexico and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), later approved as part of a World Bank-sponsored structural adjustment package that formed part of Enrique Peña Nieto’s broader neoliberal project (Rénique and Poole 2016).

foreign access to mineral and water resources, and deregulated the telecommunications and financial industries (Rénique and Poole 2016).³¹

It is likely that foreign capital's consolidation of power in Mexico will gain momentum with the construction of infrastructural corridors, called "special economic zones" (SEZs), meant to spur large scale development in regions like the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Renique & Poole 2016).³² The federal government has stated that the projects will "overcome the lags in the south of Mexico" -- presumably bridging the gap in inequality --, but many leaders of indigenous communities and local social organizations disagree (Presidencia de la República, Oct. 1, 2015).³³

Hence, in addition to the teacher union's reaction to the education reform bill, growing resentment over a number of these neoliberal projects contributed to large-scale protests that erupted during the summer of 2016. As in 2006, the events were initiated by the teachers' union, which had been regularly protesting the education reform bill since 2013. In the spring of 2016, protests escalated as union leaders were targeted by state and federal governments and over 3,000 protesting teachers in Guerrero, Oaxaca and Michoacan were fired (Asmann 2016). Blockades of main highways and an encampment

³¹ "Provisions for the privatization and financialization of public education, for example, will force poor parents to pay for their children's public schooling while simultaneously funneling public resources into private education. At the same time, energy and economic reforms will provide unbridled access to mineral and hydraulic resources in indigenous territories, while simultaneously excluding local communities from participation in the profits of unregulated infrastructural development, mining, and other extractivist industries that exploit those resources" (Rénique and Poole 2016).

³² The SEZs will be geared especially for the energy sector, and include plans for a transoceanic gas pipeline, as well as an transisthmus railway and highway that will cross through southern Mexico.

³³ For example, EDUCA, a non-profit focused on informing local Oaxacan communities of their rights and fostering political participation, has recently denounced the SEZs, stating that they are projects intended to benefit the international capital and the Mexican elite rather than local communities, and pose a direct threat to local ways of life (EDUCA 2017).

in the center of Oaxaca de Juárez were tactics used by protesters to disrupt business as usual.

On June 19, 2016, an estimated 800 federal and state police mobilized to lift the blockades and the city-center encampment resulting in violent confrontations across the state (Roldán and Martínez 2016). In the town of Nochixtlán, 50 miles north of the capital city, clashes with police resulted in 9 civilian deaths (Roldán and Martínez 2016). Protesters set up blockades around the city center in the capital, anticipating further police violence that night. There were reports that the electricity had been shut off in various parts of the city to make it difficult to document any violent activity. State intimidation remained constant in the days that followed: helicopters circled low over the city center, and on June 26, a community radio journalist critical of the Nochixtlán attacks was killed (Muñoz 2016).

The day after the Nochixtlán killings, thousands of Oaxacans participated in a mega-march in the capital. Families and students joined the protesting teachers, denouncing the state violence. The rest of the summer, countless events were held in support of Nochixtlán and the teachers. Regional highway blockades remained fixed throughout the state, blocking vehicle access on the highways north to Puebla as well as through the isthmus and to the coast. It was in this context that I began my fieldwork on Central American migration through southern Mexico.

CREATIVE RESISTANCE IN OAXACA: REVERSING MOBILITY IN THE MARGINS

Since I arrived at the shelter, conversations among staff workers pivoted around the ongoing blockades and protests. There was a fear that at any moment, violence might erupt. Migrants leaving the shelter for daily errands or short-term work were warned to take extra precautions, and to stay away from the city center. However, even as the law enforcement swarmed the city, many migrants were able to move through the protests and blockades, which had inadvertently increased their invisibility in the days following the attacks.

The creativity produced through these protests and acts of resistance increased migrants' mobility, permitting access to new, informal routes north. Blockades were set up strategically throughout the state: on the highway from Oaxaca de Juárez to Puebla; along the federal highway Panamericana, which continues from the isthmus to Chiapas; and on highways leading to tourist destinations and the port city of Salina Cruz, on the Pacific coast (Pérez Alfonso & Manzo 2016).

Visibility of Security, State Violence and Commercial Interests

It was reported that many blockades were permitting the passage of small, private vehicles, but those pertaining to large corporations -- such as Coca-Cola or PEMEX -- were not permitted to pass through (Larson 2016). The intention of the protesters was clear. The best way to make their demands *legible* to the state was by disrupting the flows that were privileged by the state: flows of transnational capital, most of which

represented elite interests over those of the marginalized. The disruption of transnational trade through the blocking of commercial vehicles along state highways achieved the desired effect. They made protesters hyper-visible, garnering attention internationally, as well as across Mexico, while at the same time they incurred incredible costs to the elite beneficiaries of President Peña Nieto's neoliberal economic development projects. PEMEX issued a statement apologizing to their clients for the delays in deliveries of gasoline, and that if the blockades were to continue they would have to shut down the refinery in Salina Cruz ("Si continúan los bloqueos..." 2016).

The hypervisibility of the ongoing protests and blockades also returned attention to the use of Mérida Initiative funding in state repression, connecting the deployment of the *gendarmerie* in Oaxaca with the controversial 2008 security agreement (Knoll Soloff 2016).³⁴ A demand for state protection of commercial interests was demonstrated in the Salina Cruz oil refinery's request for federal security forces to remove the highway blockades in the Isthmus ("Si continúan los bloqueos..." 2016). On a separate occasion, in July 2016, the president of the regional Proprietors' Union of Renewable Energy, partnered with a controversial wind energy company Eólica del Sur, demanded that the federal government take a stronger stand against protesters, applying a "*mano dura*" (strong hand) to regain control of the highways to ensure the success of economic development projects in the Isthmus (Bracamontes 2016). The state's privileging of its

³⁴ The *gendarmerie* is a specialized federal police force, made up partially of former army and navy soldiers, created in 2014. It has received Mérida Initiative funding, and certain troops have received joint border enforcement training with the U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement. For more, see <https://www.cb...eceives-honor>.

commercial relationships reflect observations made by journalist Dawn Paley in her book

Drug War Capitalism:

rather than stopping the flow of drugs, funding the drug war has bolstered a war strategy that ensures transnational corporations access to resources through dispossession and terror... in this war, terror is used against the populations in cities and rural areas, and... parallel to this terror and resulting panic, policies that facilitate foreign direct investment and economic growth are implemented (Paley 2014, 15-16).

In the teachers' movement of 2016, state violence was not used to geographically displace protesters and their communities, but it was used to reinforce policies that would economically and politically displace many who lived in rural communities in Oaxaca. Journalist Knoll Soloff noted that "the Mérida Initiative, which has funded helicopters, police dogs and training programs for thousands of Mexican police officers, has enabled intensifying repression of civil society by the state. The deadly confrontation between police and protesters in June is the latest example" (2016).

Visibility through the Breakdown and Reversal

As infrastructure ethnographer Susan Star theorized, infrastructure "*becomes visible upon breakdown*: the normally invisible quality of working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks: the server is down, the bridge washes out, there is a power blackout" (Star 1993, 382). In the case of Oaxaca, through the blockading of highways protesters made neoliberal processes (like the transnational transportation of privileged capital) visible to the wider public.

It could also be argued that the protesters' blockades functioned like checkpoints, permitting certain vehicles to pass while prohibiting others from moving forward. In

some ways, they mimic the INM and Federal Police *retenes* (checkpoints) set up throughout southern Mexico, which are intended to sift permitted and prohibited flows of people and goods through the region. However, in the case of the protesters' blockades, the prohibited and permitted flows were reversed: transnational capital, which is granted privileged mobility along state highways, was curbed, while the flows of individual people -- including migrants -- was, for the most part, permitted. Thus, the highway blockades brought attention to the types of mobilities desired by the state and at the same time unintentionally obscured the clandestine mobilities the state had sought to control under *Programa Frontera Sur*.

Disrupting Official Routes, Creating Clandestine Ones

The protests and blockades not only impeded the traffic of commercial goods, but also the traffic of visa requests through the INM's administrative branches. In the weeks following the Nochixtlán attacks, it became very difficult -- if not impossible -- for documentation to travel between INM offices, causing a disruption in the normal procedures of issuing the *tarjeta*. Ironically, the administrative process that was normally fraught with confusion and difficulty was made more convenient for some applicants.

For instance, one man with whom I spoke said he and his son had applied for *Regularización Humanitaria* in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, but were told to travel ahead to Oaxaca de Juárez to finish the process. Like many migrants, upon arriving in the city they were informed that they needed to return to the Isthmus to receive the *tarjeta* from the office where they had begun the application. However, because of the blockades, they

argued that would not be able to easily return to the Isthmus. The INM administrators conceded, and made an exception to the usual bureaucratic rules: the *tarjeta* would be received in Oaxaca de Juárez so they did not have to make the journey south through the blockades. As a result, the father and son did not have to take the risks or pay the costs of retracing their steps.

However, it was more often the case that migrants took advantage of the distraction caused by the blockades to leave the city and travel north. In the first days of the protests following the Nochixtlán attack, the shelter was practically empty. Almost all the migrants who had stayed there over the weekend had left, presumably towards Mexico City. I asked the shelter staff if they thought the protests and blockades would be a problem for the migrants who left the shelter, but they believed that, on the contrary, the blockades were providing an ideal opportunity for continuing their journeys.

A few days later I spoke with a woman who had travelled with her daughter from the Isthmus to Oaxaca de Juárez. I asked if the teachers' blockades and increased presence of law enforcement in the region had given them any trouble en route. She answered that when they arrived at the barricades, they simply got off the bus and walked -- past the protesters, and right through a line of federal authorities on the other side of the blockades. Because the authorities were more concerned with the blockades, she was not worried or afraid. A few days later, her brother and son arrived at the shelter and shared that their experience had been similar. Her brother said that although traffic was stopped up in the Isthmus, the blockades had not been a problem for them. In some places

they had to walk or pass through checkpoints, but the federal authorities paid them little attention, and even told them to keep safe.

CONCLUSION

While the teachers' protests in Oaxaca had bottlenecked commercial traffic and drew the attention of state authorities, migrants were able to slip through the blockades and checkpoints, switching vehicles if necessary, and even walking off main roads, thus creating alternative mappings of mobility through the region. The creative resistance taken up by the protestors generated new migration routes that veered off formal paths, including away from the *Regularización Humanitaria* route to state inclusion. Instead of becoming visible to the state through this administrative process, many migrants chose to move invisibly through the margins, keeping off the official map in moments of confusion and distraction for the state. Their choice not to pursue the *Regularización Humanitaria* and to instead keep moving north without protections offered by the state constitutes the "alternative forms of political action" described by Das and Poole (2004, 19), and demonstrates one of the ways that creativity persists in the margins.

At the same time, this choice to pursue alternative paths of mobility also exposes the some of the weaknesses in the administration of migrants' rights under the 2011 Migration Law and *Programa Frontera Sur*. Without adequate resources and training for the INM and *fiscalía* officials, the investigation of crimes committed against migrants and the processing of migrants' applications for *Regularización Humanitaria* will continue to be delayed or neglected. Furthermore, the oscillating status of migrants in

relation to the state -- evident in mixed encounters with INM officials (ranging from assistance to extortion to detention) -- hinders the building of a foundation of trust between these actors, and helps to produce a landscape of uncertainty that ultimately undermines the progressive objectives of the 2011 Migration Law.

Chapter V: Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I have traced part of the material-discursive process of border-making in southern Mexico. Following feminist geopolitical approaches to state ethnography, this analysis moves across scales to expose points of intersection, connection and contradiction between official state narratives as well as migrants' accounts of their embodied movement throughout the Mexican territory. Using both critical discourse analysis and ethnographic methods, this examination of both central and peripheral narratives of migration enforcement allows for a fuller understanding of how borders are materially and discursively made, moving between the highly visible, "official" framings of *Programa Frontera Sur* and the 2011 Migration Law, as well as migrants' and advocates' lived experience navigating a shifting and uncertain border landscape.

Although the sites of border production differ significantly, themes pivoting around visibility and legibility are present in both the political discourse surrounding the production of border infrastructure as well as in migrants' encounters with the state during their journeys north. On the one hand, the state performs itself to be seen as a protector of human rights -- in some cases in contradistinction to the anti-immigrant image of the U.S.; on the other hand, the state is experienced as an institution that, although visible, is often illegible to migrants attempting to navigate its administrative borders. In order to better illuminate processes rendered opaque by the state, migrant advocates have stretched their time and resources to make the state legible to migrants attempting to proceed through administrative routes for obtaining legal protections.

However, because the state often inconsistently enforces their rights, many migrants opt not to claim protections legally afforded to them and continue their journeys through alternate routes.

While this thesis points to a correlation between the multiple agendas of *Programa Frontera Sur* and the confusion produced for migrants attempting to exercise their rights and access to programs such as the *Regularización Humanitaria*, it does not claim that there is a simple or direct relation between them. Future investigation might draw further parallels between the diverging agendas laid out in *Programa Frontera Sur*, which prioritizes development, securitization and surveillance as well as respect migrants' rights, and the inadequacy and inaccessibility of the services intended for the protection of migrants within the Mexican territory.

Although this thesis does analyze the official discourse surrounding border enforcement in southern Mexico, it does not examine the embodied experiences and perspectives of government officials in administrative or security-oriented roles. As indicated in Chapter Three of this thesis, the embodied and individual experiences of government officials, their relationships with migrant advocates and increasing knowledge of the plight of migrants seeking legal protections within the state, have impacted their attitudes towards *Regularización* applicants. In alignment with both Mountz's and Latour's theoretical claims, this thesis acknowledges that everyday encounters and activity are not merely nested *within* or *below* state policies. Rather, the state is materially situated and embodied, connected horizontally rather than hierarchically to those who navigate through it. In order to better understand how far-

reaching and multi-purpose policy programs such as *Programa Frontera Sur* are understood and implemented within particular government institutions (such as the branch of the INM in charge of administering *Regularización Humanitaria*), future research might be conducted from within the agency, interviewing government officials as well as the migrants who access their services in order to better understand how state agendas are interpreted and executed internally.

Following the work of Das and Poole, this thesis is an ethnography of the state *from the perspective* of the margins. It juxtaposes official state narratives, exhibited before national and international audiences, with the narratives embodied by migrants moving through the southern border region. It observes how marginality overlaps -- how migrants' journeys are coincidentally impacted by local responses to state repression and control -- and how alternative geographies are produced through the intersection of these zones of precarity and exception. Despite state attempts to "order" what it describes as a chaotic border landscape, creativity in the margins persists, both within the *albergues* and throughout the marginalized region of southern Mexico: in some instances, the local protesters' disruption of state and commercial activities generated new opportunities for migrants' mobility.

More work might be conducted to investigate potential room for strengthened alliances between populations perpetually kept in the margins of the state (as well as the interlocking systems of global trade and governance). Chapter Four found overlap between the inadvertent impact of protesters in Oaxaca pushing back against neoliberal reforms -- ranging from education to increasing energy-sector development -- and the

mobility of displaced Central American migrants moving through southern Mexico. However, in my conversations with local non-profit leaders and activists in Oaxaca, few connections were made between the struggles of both communities. While the securitization of Mexico through programs such as the Mérida Initiative was often perceived as a means to repress and control domestic resistance groups, such as the CNTE teacher protestors, its impact on migrants traveling through Mexico was seldom discussed.

As investigated by Paley in her book *Drug War Capitalism* (2014), many of the people fleeing Central America and migrating north have been displaced, in part, due to foreign land acquisition, the inability of local farmers to compete with international markets, and rising violence as domestic inequality increases. The similar marginalized positioning of these disparate groups relative to the state and their correlated displacement through neoliberal development initiatives might be more fully fleshed out in future research and activist initiatives.

Alliances need to be strengthened not only between demographics overlapping regionally, but also across borders, bringing greater awareness to the ways U.S. anti-immigration objectives are carried out globally, in collaboration with other states like Mexico and in synchronicity with other first-world nations, such as those in Western Europe. In discussing my fieldwork with U.S. citizens, I have found that few of them have heard about U.S. participation in border enforcement in southern Mexico, and fewer still have heard of similar efforts beyond North America. Much attention has been (rightfully) focused on the construction of a wall at the southern border of the United

States, but this largely symbolic anti-immigrant project needs to be interpreted in relation to the less visible efforts to stem migration through support of “buffering” nations.

During my fieldwork, discussions of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump’s potential impact on migration were already prevalent. One migrant advocate asked several people staying at the shelter why they wanted to continue their journey north, knowing the increasingly hostility and visible anti-immigrant sentiment brewing on the northern side of the U.S.-Mexico border. One man said that under President Obama, their situation was not much better: many had hoped that he would support an immigration reform that would benefit them and their families; instead, under Obama’s tenure as president, they had seen how migration became increasingly difficult and dangerous. Could it be any worse under Trump?

In reflecting on this perspective, I am inclined to agree that in some ways, Trump’s policies will be a continuance of Obama’s understated yet hard-lined approach to border enforcement. However, Trump’s theatrical, overtly racist and xenophobic calls for a “Muslim ban” and rallying chants to “build that wall” have generated a new border narrative, distinct from the image of humanitarian concern cultivated by President Obama, with distinct consequences. This narrative has already had an impact on migration from Central America and through Mexico: after the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, I was informed that rumors had spread along migration recruitment routes encouraging people to migrate sooner rather than later, before

increased security at the U.S. southern border would make it impassable. While it is probable that new patterns in migration will emerge in correspondence with the new administration's policies, most advocates are certain that migration will continue -- just as it has continued despite strict border enforcement under *Programa Frontera Sur* -- whether a wall is built or not.

Upon concluding this thesis project, I have debated what steps to take next. Throughout my research, I have continued to question how my positionality as a U.S. citizen, born and raised in Texas, might be best leveraged to advocate for migrants' rights, especially as ICE-raids and state laws requiring police and immigration collaboration proliferate in Texas. Upon voicing these considerations to one of my informants in Oaxaca, I was urged to continue paying attention to the situation of migrants in Mexico, no matter the turns my future research takes. I have taken this advice to mean that U.S.-based research and activism, whether focused on the situation of migration in the U.S. or abroad, should attempt to trace threads of accountability and consequence between international actors, at local and global scales. The possible impacts of Trump's immigration policies will reverberate far beyond our national borders and it will be crucial to remain engaged with advocates, activists and scholars working along major migration routes to better illuminate the hidden structures that maintain state margins.

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